

# **An Evaluation of the Use of Internal Branding Among Eco-Tourism Destinations in the North Western Region of Ireland**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT

In eco-tourism destinations, business practice is usually developed around strict beliefs and values regarding the environment. By devising a brand, a business is projecting their beliefs and values to the customer through their name, logo and proposed practices. Internal branding is a means of internalising brand messages to the staff, and aligning them to the brand. The role of staff and management are crucial to the process, and frameworks are highlighted for successful implementation. This study aimed to uncover the link between internal branding within eco-tourism destinations, specifically in the North- Western region of Ireland and what the perceptions were of key participants within the service provision process regarding it.

The key findings of this study came from questionnaires with staff members, interviews with managers and mystery shops conducted by customers of the businesses. It was apparent from the data uncovered that despite staff believing internal branding took place within their organisations, there was disparity between this and their responses with regard to internal branding practices. Many staff expressed that there were no formal processes in place for the education and constant reinforcement of the brand in their organisations, and many expresses that the brand had not even been discussed in the interview process. Despite this, staff members still believed their role important in the communication of brand values within the business.

Similarly, managers also placed emphasis on the staff role in communicating brand values, but all admitted to a lack of education pertaining to the brand internally. All of the managers in the study felt it important to align the staff to the brand, and two of the businesses had elements of internal branding incorporated into the hiring process. However, it emerged in published literature that for internal branding efforts to be successful, a strong external brand was required. This is to ensure that internalised brand messages match the ones being projected to the customer. All of the managers specified

that there was not a great deal of emphasis placed on the external brand, though all understood the benefits associated with branding.

The effects of a weak external brand was apparent at times in the customer responses, and respondents in one business especially, expressed disparity at times between what they expected from brand to what they received. This may have been attributed to weak external brand messages. Despite this in two businesses, overall customers believed staff to be successfully aligned to the brand. This was concurrent with what staff believed, and it was proposed that internal branding may be something which eco-tourism businesses do to a certain degree unconsciously.

From the findings, recommendations were made. It was suggested that eco-tourism businesses strengthen their external brand to ensure implementing an internal brand will be successful. It was then suggested that processes and procedures be implemented to educate and continually reinforce the brand, proposed by the literature reviewed. The final recommendation, also based on the existing literature, was that businesses implement a method of staff performance appraisal so that they may continually assess staff performance and alignment with regard to the brand.

Published literature expressed many benefits to internal branding such as enhanced customer relations and differentiation from competitors. Internal branding is about successfully aligning beliefs and values, which are two components crucial to the success of eco-tourism.

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For my parents John and Nancy, and my sister Saoirse. Your patience and encouragement throughout the past five years and all of my life has been crucial to all of my successes. I could not have done any of this without your love and support.

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For all of those who are not personally mentioned but whose guidance has helped me reach this point, I thank you.

## **DEDICATION**

**For my family and friends!**

# DECLARATION

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I hereby declare that the research conducted in this dissertation for the award of MSc of Master of Science in Marketing is all my own work, with the exception of acknowledged sources.

Signed:

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EU	European Union
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
CSO	Central Statistics Office
EUEB	European Union Eco-Labeling Board

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## **Chapter 1- Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Within in this chapter, a brief evaluation of the evolution of marketing theory will first be presented. The rationale behind the research undertaken will then be discussed. The question which the research aims to solve will be clearly defined, through the completion of five research objectives. The reader will then be provided with an overview of the entire study before the chapter concludes.

### **1.2 Evolution of Internal Branding**

Marketing in practice has been around for several decades, but it was not until after the 1950s that it became embedded in published literature as the most crucial function within an organisation by highly regarded theorists such as Kotler. This was because it placed customers at the centre of operations rather than being primarily profits driven (Drucker et. al, 1954 cited in Webster, 1992). After the 1950s, marketing began to rapidly change and grow with the development of theories in areas such as relationship marketing and services marketing in the 1970s and 1980s (Webster, 1992).The emergence of such marketing practices can be attributed to changes in the marketplace, such as increased levels of competition, combined with growing levels of disposable income. Businesses used these tools as a means of attracting and retaining valued customers. The emergence of relationship marketing accelerated the adoption of services marketing practice in many businesses, as an aide to create even stronger relationships with customers (Swartz and Iacobucci, 2000). Webster (2005) attributes the materialisation of such theories to two major changes in the marketing environment at that time. The first was that managers began to realise the benefits of being more customer focused, and the second was due to the employment of quantitative research methods and a development of the understanding of human behaviour within business.

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Fisk et al. (1993) discusses businesses taking interest in consumer behaviour emerging in the 1960s, and although services marketing in practice had been in place for sometime already, (Mc Carthy developed the fundamental “4P’s” in the 1960s), it became more prominent in literature in the 1970s. Swartz and Iacobucci (2000) believe that the change from marketing products to services came about due to the involvement of the customer in the production process. Customer expectations were varied and increasingly complex. Due to a growth in technology, businesses were now able to tailor to individual customer needs, which resulted in the customer being a co-creator of what they desired. Essentially, the production process itself became part of the offering. Grönroos (1998 pg. 15, cited in Swartz and Iacobucci, 2000) discusses the change from marketing products to services.

“In traditional mainstream marketing, the role of marketing is to bridge the gap between production and consumption... in a service context, no such gap exists.”

As earlier stated, within services marketing Mc Carthy’s “Marketing Mix” was a significant theory. It comprised of four crucial elements to consider when engaging in marketing, known as “The 4P’s”. These were: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. This framework gained importance within services marketing which were becoming increasingly important to businesses. However, Booms and Bitner (1981, from Swartz and Iacobucci, 2000) adapted this further to include participants, physical evidence and processes, showing the dynamic and ever-changing nature of services marketing.

Despite many of the fundamental theories being in existence for a number of years, many are as relevant in today’s challenging environment as ever. However, developments continue to be made in the area of services marketing. More recently, Frei (2008) notes that within service businesses, one of the key elements that an organisation must create and manage effectively is their employees. He states that employees are a key determinant of successful service provision. He also discusses how service businesses can

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hire for attitude or aptitude, or both. Frei (2008) highlights the challenges linked with hiring for both, stating that it can be costly for an organisation, and poses retention issues. Though some research discusses the benefits of hiring for skills versus personality, much of the literature is based more so around the actual hiring of the employee rather than its relevance to marketing practice (Moy and Lam, 2004; Hoffman, 1996).

This study will examine the role of internal branding within services marketing, with an emphasis on the impact staff may have on the successful implementation within the organisation’s marketing programme. Branding as a concept has been evident for hundreds of years, and was originally used as a means of differentiating cattle by “branding” them with a unique mark, burnt into their hide. Modern branding as a marketing function emerged after the industrial revolution where similar products were in direct competition for a limited pool of consumers (Roper and Parker, 2006). Swartz and Iacobucci (2000) believe that the services sector is currently saturated with competition, and that it is essential to build brand strategies to increase brand loyalty and retain customers in order to remain competitive. This study will evaluate the role of internal branding in achieving this aim. Mahnert and Torres (2007, pg. 56) offer the following definition of internal branding:

“Internal branding is the concerted, inter-departmental and multi-directional internal communications effort carried out in order to create and maintain an internal brand. Internal branding attempts to achieve consistency with the external brand and encourage brand commitment and the propensity for brand championship among employees. To this end, internal branding is the reflection of the values and the realisation of the promise of the brand internally and externally.”

The body of published literature suggests that successful implementation of internal branding can lead greater satisfaction amongst customers (e.g. Burmann

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and Zeplin, 2005; Thompson et al, 1999; Kotler and Keller, 2006; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999).

While much has been written on the role of staff in service provision, there is a gap in the published research linking staff personality to brand personality, specifically in eco-tourism destinations. This study aims to address this imbalance, and has adopted a focused approach by studying eco-tourism destinations in the North- Western region of Ireland.

Berthon et al. (2005, pg 151-152) states that, “attracting employees with superior skills and knowledge comprises a source of competitive knowledge” and that “intellectual and human capital is the foundation of competitive advantage in the modern economy”. This would suggest that hiring the right staff can have positive effects on a business. This is even truer in regards to services marketing, as there are less tangible aspects to measure successful provision. Swartz and Iacobucci (2000, pg 13) reinforce this, stating “services are frequently described by characteristics such as intangibility, heterogeneity, [and] inseparability of production from consumption.”

This study aims to evaluate the role staff play in their organisation’s internal branding efforts in eco-tourism destinations in the North-West region of Ireland.

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### 1.3 Rationale

Ireland’s recent economic development has seen a major shift in the type of economic activity which has occurred in the country in the past century. In the 1950s, after years of protectionism due to the Great Depression, the Irish economy was inward focused and mainly agricultural based, with some manufacturing of agricultural products (Farely, 1973; Power, 2009). However, several factors such as policy shifts towards a more outward facing perspective resulted in an increase in manufacturing in the country in areas such as clothing and textiles (Farely, 1973). Successive macroeconomic policy developments in areas such of education, taxation and monetary policy saw the levels of economic growth increase, resulting in the “Celtic Tiger” period from the late 1990s to early 2000s. Key enabling factors included a growing population, the majority of them young and English speaking, a larger skilled work force due to inward immigration, Successive Social Partnership Programmes, and improvements in infrastructure and regional development all led to an improved standard of living, causing levels of disposable income to rise. Due to these factors, the Irish economy became more services based (Power, 2009). However, the world economy is currently in recession. Businesses now face one of the most challenging environments to operate in. Despite this, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment in 2008, Mary Coughlin stated that, “over the next ten years, services will be the key driver in Ireland’s economic success and job creation” (Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment, 2008).

One of the key areas of service provision in Ireland is tourism and related industry. Tourism plays a major role in creating jobs in the services sector, be it from domestic clients or holidaymakers travelling from abroad. In 2006, it was reported that over 800,000 were employed in Ireland in the services sector (CSO, 2009b). 12% of all jobs created in the country at this time were in the tourism and hospitality sector specifically (Failte Ireland, 2007). In 2008 it was reported that 7,839,000 visitors came to Ireland from overseas, and earnings from tourists visiting Ireland totalled €4,781m (CSO, 2009a). In regards to domestic travel, i.e. holidays taken by Irish natives within Ireland,



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8.3 million trips occurred in 2008, resulting in revenue of €1.5bn. During these breaks, some of the most popular activities included visits to national parks (26%), visits to houses and castles (25%), and visits to gardens (20%). In regards to adventure seeking, 26% of domestic tourists engaged in water sports, 25% engaged in hiking and walking, and 11% choose golf. Spa breaks were also popular with domestic holiday makers (24%). Due to their popularity, venues for these activities in the North-West of Ireland will be evaluated in this study. Participants recorded between a 79% to 98% satisfaction note, with 86% reporting that they received value for money (Failte Ireland, 2009a). In regards to non-domestic travellers, hiking and walking was the most popular with more than 500,000 participating. Golf and angling were also quite popular with approximately 140,000 participants for each, with cycling and equestrian activities also ranking quite high with tourists (Failte Ireland, 2009b). The survey did not however measure the level of repeat business from satisfied customers.

In 2008, approximately €4.7bn of revenue in Ireland came from overseas travellers. Industry research has shown that in 2008, 1.5 million tourists travelled to the North-West region of Ireland, spending more than €420m (Failte Ireland, 2009b), indicating that tourism is a vital part of the economy in the area chosen for the study. Respondents were asked what they valued most in regards to their experiences with destinations. Friendly/hospitable people ranked as the most important contributor to positive experience, with 81% of respondents ranking it “very important” (Failte Ireland, 2009b). This would suggest that the role of staff in service provision is important factor to visitors.

The importance of tourism as a revenue generator cannot be understated. The Environmental Protection Agency states “tourism is often the main source of income and employment for rural communities” (EPA, 2004, pg. 201). Failte Ireland estimates that in 2008, there were approximately 322,119 employed in the tourism sector (Failte Ireland, 2008). A sector within tourism which is rising in popularity is sustainable tourism, as

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people now are more aware than ever of their impact on the environment. Failte Ireland states in their Environmental Action Plan 2007-2009 that,

“The future of Irish tourism is inextricably linked to the quality of the environment. Our scenic landscapes, coastline, rivers and lakes, and cultural heritage are the bedrock upon which Irish tourism has been built. The economic viability and competitiveness of the Irish tourism industry can only be sustained if the quality of these resources is maintained. Now, more than ever, Ireland’s tourism industry relies on strong an appropriate environmental policies.”

(Failte Ireland, 2007 pg 3)

The value placed on the environment by tourists is evidenced by the finding that 80% of visitors stated the scenery as an important reason for visiting, and 74% stated that they were drawn here by the “natural unspoilt environment” (Failte Ireland, 2007). Indeed in the same survey, 75% believed Ireland to be a “clean and environmentally green destination” (Failte Ireland, 2007, pg. 5). If the environment and landscape of Ireland are determinants of why people visit, then it is apparent that preservation of these is crucial. Eco-tourism is one way of doing this and is an emerging trend to respond to the eco-centric consumer.

The global recession has also impacted the tourism sector with a 2% decrease reported in tourism by the Central Statistics Office, combined with an 8% decrease in the amount of money spent by tourists in the country on holidays/recreation/leisure from 2007 (CSO, 2009a). Service businesses will suffer the effects of more frugal lifestyles and need to find new ways of retaining customers. This is essential if businesses want to survive in this challenging environment. However, it is not only recessionary times which have had a negative impact on the tourism industry. Failte Ireland (2007, pg 9) states,

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“The unprecedented rate of development in Ireland over the past 15 years has brought many benefits to the Irish economy and to our tourism industry in particular. However, this economic growth is still closely linked with environmental degradation, often resulting in a negative impact on the quality of the tourism product.”

This statement mirrors the beliefs of an organisation which promote an area called “The Greenbox”. This research is conducted in the North Western region of Ireland, comprising of Sligo, Donegal and Leitrim, an area part of a major eco-tourism region, known as “The Greenbox”, and coordinators specify that the well-preserved landscape of the region has lead to many eco-destinations setting up businesses in the area. The ethos of the Greenbox is to encourage sustainable tourism practices and to diminish the impact on the environment. The focus on eco-tourism emerged due to the geographical region where the research was conducted. It is a hub of eco-tourism activities, and consists of varying eco-destinations, making this sector the main focus of this study.

The challenging economic environment mentioned earlier can present a difficult atmosphere for any tourism business to operate in. However, organisations can adopt policies and procedures to help them weather the storm. One proposed method is through the use of internal branding. Berthon et al. (2005) discusses the importance of internal branding, stating that while an employee can enhance a brand message, if values of staff and the organisation do not match, they can erode brand messages. Given the current economic decline and challenging business environment, it is pertinent to examine internal branding as a means of improved service delivery.

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#### **1.4 Research Question**

The following research question was devised to uncover the existence of internal branding within specified eco-tourism destinations:

“Do managers of eco-tourism destinations in the North Western region of Ireland consciously engage in internal branding and what are the opinions of staff and customers on the role of internal branding?”

#### **1.5 Research Objectives**

The following are the objectives of the research undertaken:

1. To review existing literature and research about internal branding.
2. To establish whether managers/ owners make a conscious attempt to hire staff who will compliment the brand offering.
3. To uncover perceptions of staff in eco-tourism destinations with regards to the role of internal branding in their organisation.
4. To uncover customer’s perceptions on performance of staff in eco-tourism destinations and to determine the effectiveness of the organisation’s internal branding efforts.
5. To suggest recommendations for eco-tourism destinations in the North Western region in Ireland in relation to internal branding.

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## **1.6 Study Overview**

Chapter two will discuss the research methodology employed and a justification of all approaches used.

Chapter three contains the literature review and provides an extensive overview into existing literature on pertinent topics relevant to this study. These topics include services marketing, the evolution of internal marketing which has led to the development of internal branding, the relevance of branding, and customer relationship management.

Chapter four presents the major findings of the research in regards to the previously outlined research objectives.

Chapter five provides conclusions, and the researcher makes recommendations based on the research.

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## **1.7 Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the rationale behind the research, defined the research question, outlined five main research objectives, and provided a chapter overview. This study aims to address gaps in published research pertaining to the link between staff attributes and brand attributes, and the effects they have on consumer experience. This study was conducted with the goal of adding to the existing body of research. It also aims to identify trends which may arise, specifically in eco-tourism destinations in the North Western region of Ireland, as the geographical location provides a unique opportunity to evaluate organisations with a niche target market. Mahnert and Torres (2007, pg 54) state that,

“Much of the literature on internal branding to date has been disparate and lacking in focus and definition. However, there are definite, identifiable trends...”

## Chapter Two- Research Methodology

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter the various types of research methods used in this study are discussed. Primary methods which were used to complete the research are justified within the chapter with the support of existing literature regarding research methodology. Literature was retrieved from various websites, on-line journals and text books. Primary methods used in the study include questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and mystery shops. These methods were chosen with the objective of producing a mix of both qualitative and quantitative responses. The sample selection is discussed and the research techniques used for each sample are explained in-depth. Ethical concerns of the research regarding each sample are then discussed.

### 2.2 Methodology Justification

It is common when conducting research to choose between two main approaches, quantitative and qualitative. Hyde (2000, pg. 84) clearly outlines the differences between these approaches:

“Quantitative methodologies seek... to describe the general characteristics of a population and to ignore the details of each particular element studied...Qualitative methodologies however, seek to explain the particular. The qualitative study must provide conclusions which account for the particulars of every case... to study issues in-depth.”

As the nature of qualitative questions is that they provoke in-depth responses, this method is the primary choice of research in this study, though there will be some quantitative elements. As the aim of the research is to uncover views and beliefs of management, staff

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and customers within the target businesses, a qualitative approach is best. The qualitative research appears in this study in the form of in-depth interviews. Mystery shops for customers and questionnaires for staff will produce both qualitative and quantitative results, as they will include questions which will produce both open-ended and statistical answers.

Morgan et al (1998, cited in Brannen 2005), state that by combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches, a researcher can experience the benefit of more in-depth research. By combining the two approaches, research findings can be enhanced as findings can either corroborate, compliment or contradict each other, or the qualitative research can elaborate upon what the quantitative research has found. Similarly, Brannen (2005, pg. 174) feels that in more recent times, there has been a greater need for “practical rather than scientific research”. She recommends that the research process combine a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches, and suggests a format to follow which begins with a research “design phase”, followed by a “field work phase”, and a phase for “interpretation and contextualisation” of the data received (Brannen 2005, pp. 177-180). This research process has been adapted for the purpose of this study.

The first method of primary research used in this study was questionnaires. They were administered to staff within two of the businesses to gain insight into the importance of the brand offering and their role in successful service delivery. Also, questionnaires were seen as a useful tool in uncovering perceptions about how the organisation is branded both externally and internally. This provided focus for later use in interviews with managers/owners. By presenting the management with the findings from the staff questionnaires the researcher aimed to achieve more thorough questioning.

When creating questionnaires and surveys, Prince, Manolis and Tratner (2009) propose a method which aides analysis for this study. Their study, relating to the US motor industry, used four main areas in their surveys as a means of gauging customer satisfaction with service delivery; trust, satisfaction, compliance and conflict. While these



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four categories specifically were not used in this study, the idea of segregating questions into sections was adopted and modified to suit the study. The categories chosen in this study for analysis of surveys were based around the idea of internal brand management, eco-tourism, staff beliefs, perceptions and performance, and customer’s perceptions of staff performance with relation to the brand.

The sample selection will now be explained and justified.

### **2.3 Sample Selection**

It was essential before the research was undertaken that an appropriate sample was selected. DiCicco- Bloom and Crabtree (2006) state that when selecting the sample, groups should have similar roles and characteristics and these should be relevant to the research question. Within this study, the sample included major eco-tourism destinations in the North Western region of Ireland, comprising of the geographical area of Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal. Three destinations were included in the study. The small sample was a major limitation of this study, as the research would have been strengthened by the inclusion of more businesses. However, due to time constraints and availability of managers, this was not possible. Despite this, the businesses chosen provided in-depth understanding of their organisation’s internal branding. Furthermore, while they each operate within the eco-tourism sector, their service offering is different which provides an excellent opportunity to identify trends or anomalies, either unique to one business or a regular occurrence within the sector.

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### 2.3.1 Staff

After the target businesses were chosen, the next sample selected was the staff. All members of two of the organisations were included in the study, as the manager of the third business refused permission for his staff to take part. Questionnaires were administered by post, and management confirmed a 100% response rate. In total there were eleven staff responses between the two businesses. All staff members were targeted as successful internal branding must include all participants in the organisation. Surveys consisting of fifteen general questions about the staff member and their perceptions were administered. Questionnaires for staff can be found under Appendix A, at the end of the study.. The first few questions within the questionnaires were devised to be non-challenging and non-invasive and to give the researcher insight into the staff member’s role and length of employment. It was necessary to investigate the perception of the level of external branding first so that it could be identified if businesses merely engaged in external branding, both internal and external branding, or neither. Although this study deals with internal branding, it was necessary to understand the awareness of the external brand, as evidence exists that successful businesses must have a strong external brand before they can internalise it.

The remainder of questions were categorised into three sections; staff’s brand knowledge, perceptions of the level of internal branding in the workplace, and staff perceptions about their role in the internal branding process. Questions were included on the hiring process, as internal branding has a strong presence here, and processes may need to be altered. There was a section of questioning regarding the brand in relation to eco-tourism with the aim of gaining even further insight about how well staff knew the brand, and their perceptions of its role in the sector. The following cluster of questions was designed to highlight staff’s understanding of their role in relation to promoting the brand, and whether they felt aligned to the brand. The final question was the only one separate from the categories, as it was devised to understand whether there was a form of staff performance appraisal in place that staff members were aware of. This was created

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because several theorists in the literature review chapter expressed that staff performance appraisal is an essential component of internal branding. After the responses were gathered, the data retrieved from the questionnaires was then analysed to be used in interviews with the next sample group; owners and managers.

### **2.3.2 Managers/ Owners**

Managers/owners of the selected businesses were the next sample group approached and interviewed. This was done to gain understanding as to what their perceptions were about the brand of the organisation, what role they believed the staff to play in promoting the brand, and the level of internal branding in each respective business. By selecting both owners/managers and staff, the research endeavoured to uncover any inconsistency between what management and staff perceive the level of internal branding to be within the business. The management interviews were based around eighteen general questions, but each manager's questions varied slightly depending on what the responses from the staff questionnaires revealed. By conducting staff questionnaires first, insight and information was provided to aid deeper and more thorough questioning.

When structuring interviews, DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) feel that the first question should be non-threatening and easy for the respondent to answer, so that it allows them to relax. Questions such as, “What is your role in this business?” and “How long have you worked here?” were used as a means of easing the respondent gradually into questions which required more thought and depth answers. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) describe how the interviewer and interviewee then enter an “Exploratory Phase” in which the respondent relaxes and becomes engaged in in-depth description. The interviewer was able to ask deeper questions then, as the respondents felt more relaxed and at ease answering questions such as (Q.10, Appendix B) “What is your opinion of staff's role in communicating the brand to customers?”

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The next stage, the one which was most desired, is describe by the authors as the “Participation Stage”, where respondents were most open, as it is here the authors feel co-creation of information can occur between both parties. It is in this phase where more thought provoking questions were asked, (e.g. Q.13. “Do you feel it is important to align staff traits and values with that of the brand? Why do you feel this way?). It is at this stage that the researcher discussed the findings of staff questionnaires with the owner or manager to encourage even deeper responses.

Robson (1990, taken from Stokes and Bergen 2006) feels however that there is one key set back to choosing in-depth interviews as opposed to other options such as focus groups; the researcher only gains information from one respondent, rather than from several who may prompt new information from each other. This however, is the main reason why in-depth interviews were chosen in this study with management, rather than focus groups with the entire staff body. If focus groups had been completed they would not have produced the level of depth with one of the key respondents in the organisation; the manager. This is re-enforced by Stokes and Bergen (2006) who state that the benefits of one-to-one in-depth interviews are that stronger and deeper opinions may be expressed by respondents, thus leading to clearer and better explained answers. Interviews are also an effective tool if the interviewer and questions are unbiased, as they can provide an arena in which the respondent can answer truthfully and comfortably without any forms of pressure for example, from peer groups. It is important to note in this study that all of the business’s and respondent’s identities were kept confidential. The researcher felt this would allow all respondents to answer more freely, honestly, and gain a more in-depth understanding of the research topic.

When devising interviews, DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) declare that the basic research question may be used as an initial question, but that anywhere from five to ten more specific questions may develop from this. This is apparent in this study, as the main research question is about internal branding, but has lead to five other research objectives.

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The final sample group to be included was the customers. Responses were compared to the responses of owners/managers and staff to highlight inconsistencies. Their opinions and perceptions were vital to the study and although they could not be included in-depth, mystery shops were completed.

### 2.3.3 Customers

In the final stage of the primary research, mystery shops were conducted to understand what customers felt about the brand, and how well they felt staff to have performed in relation to their pre-conceptions of the brand offering. Wilson (1998, p.414) defines mystery shopping as:

“A form of participant observation [which] uses researchers to act as customers or potential customers to monitor the quality of processes and procedures used in the delivery of a service.”

Erstad (1998, pg. 34) believes that the best way to begin mystery shopping is to create a “shopper evaluation form”. It is intended to be devised with the help of the frontline staff to understand what their impressions are of what the customer deems essential to good service delivery. With regard to this study, the score card had elements on it encouraging the shopper to evaluate the link between staff personality and brand personality, and whether they perceived it as a determinant of successful service delivery. The scorecard given to mystery shoppers to use in the evaluation of the businesses can be found in the back of the text under Appendix C.

Wilson (1998) emphasises that a mystery shop is about analysing how each process is successfully completed, rather than what is actually being done. Wilson (1998) also states that mystery shop scorecards are predominately used to uncover facts rather than

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perceptions (i.e. “The restrooms were clean.”). However in this study, it was used to uncover perceptions. Respondents were asked to evaluate the organisations based on their perceptions of staff performance with regards to the brand (i.e. Q.3. “Staff personality suited the brand.”) .

It was acknowledged that interviewing customers would have produced more in-depth responses than mystery shops, but time constraints and the reluctance of participating businesses did not allow for this. However, by conducting mystery shops in the businesses, important customer perceptions could still be identified. Existing literature would suggest that customer satisfaction is enhanced in businesses which engage in internal branding. Mystery shops were conducted as a means of supporting or disproving this concept.

## 2.4 Ethical Issues

Lund (2006, cited from Michaelides and Gibbs 2006, pg. 45), feels that the main four main parties that the research has an ethical duty to is the “general public, respondent, client and the researcher”. It is the role of the researcher to be honest and transparent in all actions pertaining to the research. The researcher had a responsibility to respondents to only use the information given for the purpose intended and to keep respondents personal details confidential. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) states that if an interviewer is planning to record an interview, then they should seek signed consent beforehand and destroy the recording once analysed. In this study, before interviews were conducted, both the researcher and the respondent confirmed that the identities of the businesses would be kept confidential, and the tapes and transcripts from the interviews would be destroyed subsequently. It is for this reason that business names are not given and that all participants including managers, staff and mystery shoppers are referred to anonymously. Businesses are named Businesses A, B, and C respectively. Confidentiality was crucial in this study, as it allowed respondents to answer more freely and openly.

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Staff’s individual responses were kept confidential, and there was a disclaimer across the top of every questionnaire administered, assuring that each staff member’s identity would be protected.

## **2.5 Limitations of the Study**

Time was a major limitation of this study. As stated earlier, Robson (1990, cited in Stokes and Bergen 2006) feels that, in regards to the interview process, its main weakness is that it only takes the opinion of one person at a time, rather than several, making it a more time consuming process. Due to time restrictions, not all of the businesses which the researcher had hoped to include in the study were able to participate, as all businesses are seasonal by nature.

This led to the issue of availability arising. The majority of the primary research was to be conducted in the months June, July and August. However, this is the busiest time of year for tourism businesses nation-wide, and it meant that some businesses were not available to contribute to the research. By only using three businesses in the study, conclusions cannot be made regarding the sector, although certain trends have emerged. If the manager of Business C allowed staff questionnaires to be administered, staff response rate would have increased, and the study enhanced.

Time restrictions also affected the responses gained from customers, and there was only enough time to conduct mystery shops with customers, rather than in-depth, one-to-one interviews. This meant that perceptions were only identified rather than examined thoroughly. However, this leads to potential for further, more in-depth research.

Two experts regarding eco-tourism in the North- Western region of Ireland were identified repeatedly throughout the course of the primary research by participating

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businesses. However, both were on annual leave for the duration of the study and the research may have been enhanced by their input.

A shortcoming of the research is that it only focuses on the North-West region of Ireland, rather than the entire island of Ireland. The study also only focuses on internal branding of within eco-tourism destinations specifically, rather than all forms of hospitality business. However, this again provides areas where further research may be conducted.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter discussed the research approach and process chosen for this study, and justification for the sample selection and research instruments used was provided. Ethical issues and limitations regarding the research were dealt with.

In the next chapter, a review of the existing literature will be conducted to develop an understanding of the existing theories and place the research in a theoretical framework.



## **Chapter 3- Literature Review**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter will examine existing literature on topics pertinent to this study. It was first necessary to discuss branding as a marketing function. Internal marketing is then discussed, as theories reviewed suggest that internal branding evolved from there. Internal branding theories are then examined, and frameworks for the successful implementation and maintenance of internal branding are reviewed.

Within several of the internal branding theories, two key participants in the internal branding process emerged; management and staff. The roles of both groups are dealt with in great detail. The final section discusses the topic of eco-tourism, as research was conducted within this sector. It is important to note that services marketing was acknowledged as an important area of discussion, and was heavily linked to internal branding in most of the theories. It is essential for an understanding of branding as an external concept to be developed first.

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### 3.2 Branding

Bergstrom et al. (2002, pp. 133-134) discuss the importance of understanding the concept of branding before investigating internal branding. They define a brand to be “the sum total of all perceived functional and emotional aspects of a product or service,” adding that the act of branding “is about adding a higher level of emotional meaning to a product or service, thereby increasing its value to customers and other stakeholders.” As internal branding is the internalisation of external messages regarding the brand, it is first necessary to understand what the term “brand” entails. The American Marketing Association defines a brand as:

“A name term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competition.”

(Keller 2003, cited in Aurand et al., 2005, pg. 164)

When a strong brand has been developed, it can be used in strategy as a tactical tool,

“...for creating, nurturing and fostering the continual development of relevant and appropriate brand value propositions...it enables firms to build reputation among its customers and other stakeholders and creates, nurtures and innovates on their market-based assets.”

(Abimbola and Kocak, 2007, pg. 422)

Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) state that greater levels of competition amongst service businesses has led to organisations investing in brand building as a means of achieving competitive advantage. Abimbola and Kocak (2007) support this by noting that in the current economy, business will find it difficult to pursue marketing strategies without engaging in branding. Opoku et al. (2007) state that brands are essential within the marketing function, as they are a facilitator of repeat business leading to increased

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revenue and the ultimate longevity of the firm. This would suggest that the benefits of having a strong external brand can include increased demand for the organisations offering which can result in increased profits. Given the current challenging business environment, organisations must be more proactive in ensuring continued success. Branding offers a pathway to achieving this goal.

However, despite these and other benefits which a business may experience through branding, such as differentiation, making it more difficult for competition to copy their offering (Abimbola and Kocak, 2007), in many small businesses branding is usually done casually and is viewed as not obligatory (Merrilees, 2007). Merrilees’ (2007) research shows that many people only associate brands with very large, well-known companies (for example Ford, Nike and Coca- Cola). It is important however, for smaller businesses to also build strong brands as in smaller businesses, there “is a more personal character to the brand” (Merrilees, 2007, pg. 405). This would provide an opportunity for small businesses to gain competitive advantage over large organisations. Several other theorists (such as Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007; Abimbola and Kocak, 2007) suggest there is value to be gained by branding small independent businesses. Branding in small businesses is of particular relevance to this study, as all of the businesses evaluated employ less than 10 members of staff.

Once a strong external brand has been created, Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) believe that internal marketing can be used as useful tool for promoting the brand within an organisation. This is relevant because internal branding is a result of the internalisation of external brand messages.

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### 3.3 Internal Marketing

It is evident from published literature, that the concept of internal branding, evolved from internal marketing, with many theorists (Mahnert and Torres, 2007; Thompson et al. 1999; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007) supporting this stance. Rafiq and Ahmed (2000, cited in Mahnert and Torres, 2007) state that internal marketing is a not a new concept, but rather one which has been around for approximately 25 years.

Mahnert and Torres (2007, pg.55) offer the following definition of internal marketing:

“Internal marketing is the accumulation of functions and tools aimed at the formation and maintenance of a consistent, efficient, effective, and customer-oriented workforce. These objectives are achieved through the communication with and attraction, retention, motivation, education and management of suitable employees. Suitable employees in this context are defined as those employees who are conscious of and committed to the needs of the organisation and other employees at all levels in the internal value chain.”

The development of internal marketing has aided the development of internal branding. Mahnert and Torres (2007) believe, through their evaluation of existing theories, that in recent times, internal branding developed within internal marketing theories. The internal branding concept is discussed in the next section.

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### 3.4 Internal Branding

Internal branding is the main focus of this study, and it is necessary to explore several definitions, to create an in-depth understanding on the topic. Kotler and Keller (2006, pg. 286) define internal branding as:

“...activities and processes that help to inform and inspire employees. It is critical for service companies and retailers that all employees have an up-to-date, deep understanding of the brand and its promise...the brand promise will not be delivered unless everyone lives the brand.”

Keller (2008, pg. 668) further expands on this, stating that it also “...ensures that employees and marketing partners appreciate and understand basic branding notions and how they can affect the equity of brands” and Punjaisri and Wilson (2007, pg.60) believe that “the objective of internal branding is to ensure that employees transform espoused brand messages into brand reality for customers and other stakeholders.”

Mahnert and Torres (2007, pg. 56) suggest that when implementing internal branding, a cross-functional, holistic approach is required, stating that it must be a

“Concerted, inter-departmental and multi-directional internal communications effort... [it] attempts to achieve consistency with the external brand and encourage brand commitment and the propensity for brand championship among employees. To this end, internal branding is the reflection of the values and the realisation of the promise of the brand internally and externally.”

Garbarino and Johnson’s (1999) research has found that there are very few studies which look at how customer satisfaction varies depending on how strong a relationship they have with the organisation. This a similar objective to one of the research aims in this

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study. An investigation is being made into the factor which theoretically affects the strength of these relationships; internal branding. However it is not only customer relationships which are being measured but staff also.

The link between internal and external brands is crucial. Brand image is a term referring to the brand in the eyes of the receiver/ customer, while brand identity defines the brand internally. However, despite the differences, they are not two separate functions and a strong external brand must be supported by internal activities as well, or the consumer will be let down (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). It is suggested that, since many organisations are looking for more emotional responses from customers, they should change policies to allow staff to “live the brand” (Thompson et al., 1999). This study takes up this theme to discover if staff in eco-tourism destinations actually live the brand, as eco-tourism is about catering to many tourists’ beliefs that it is crucial to reduce their impact upon their hosts. The number of supporters of eco-tourism is growing (Failte Ireland, 2009c) and if businesses wish to excel, policy change may help to facilitate businesses (Thompson et al., 1999). By becoming more internally branded and successfully aligning staff to the brand, not only is performance enhanced, but employees have a more positive outlook with regard to the brand which indirectly improves overall performance (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). It is essential however that everyone within an organisation must be dedicated to the idea of internal branding (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007) otherwise it will be unsuccessful.

Internal branding theorists highlight that there are key participants within an organisation which are crucial to the process. Staff and management are the two which appear most frequently. With regards to staff, Hoffman (1996, pg. 20) believes that “it is important that an employee’s values match those of the company” and it is suggested that an organisation not only hire someone who can successfully do the job, but also fits in with the organisation (Bowen et al., 1991). This would suggest that both personality and skills set are equally important. However in contrast to this, Gene Powell believes that successful interviewing is based 95% on personality and only 5% on qualifications

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(Hoffman, 1996). This would suggest there is disparity between what some managers believe to be true. This could be attributed to the fact that there is a limited amount of studies available on internal branding (Thompson et al. 1991; Mahnert and Torres, 2007; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007; Merrilees, 2007) which may make it difficult for managers to identify a successful process of implementation.

Apart from hiring, management has several other key roles to fulfil with regards to successful internal branding. It is a crucial role of the organisation to educate employees about the brand to ensure that “they are aligned and committed to enacting its values” (Thompson et al., 1999, pg. 820). It is also vital that management devise appropriate reward systems and resources be allocated to facilitate internal branding (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007).

Despite the fact that there is “no holistic model for internal branding” (Burmam and Zeplin, 2005, pg. 281), some models and frameworks for internal branding appeared throughout the literature and are proposed in the next section.

### **3.4.1 Proposed Frameworks for Internal Branding**

Processes and frameworks are proposed in this section to aide the implementation and maintenance of internal branding. The frameworks begin from as early as the hiring process and continue through other various processes within an organisation, suggesting that internal branding is an on-going process.

Bowen et al. (1991) proposes a four step process to hiring someone who has a personality which fits the organisation as a whole rather than the skills for merely the job at hand. First, managers must assess the overall work environment including both the job and the organisation itself. They must then infer the person required to fill the role by being suggestive about personality traits, personal needs, interests and values, and certain

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technical and social skills required of an applicant. Managers must then set certain “rites of passage” that will highlight how well the employee and organisation fit together. Bowen et al (1991) suggests this to be done through abilities and personality testing, and allowing other members of staff to conduct interviews. It is then vital for management to emphasise the importance of staff that fit the organisation in the workplace, so that the message is clear and understood.

This theory is heavily based in the hiring aspect of internal branding. Mahnert and Torres (2007) also suggest internal branding as a process to be completed in sequential steps. However, their theory is created more with regard to the implementation of internal branding within an entire organisation. They propose three stages for successful execution:

1. Planning- making internal and external brand messages parallel. Must be led from the top; from the CEO down, being visibly supported at every level.
2. Execution- Staff role is essential here. Performance must be measured.
3. Evaluating- “two interrelated goals need to be considered; the achievement of brand commitment among staff, and the effect of such a commitment on brand performance” (Mahnert and Torres, 2007, pg. 60).

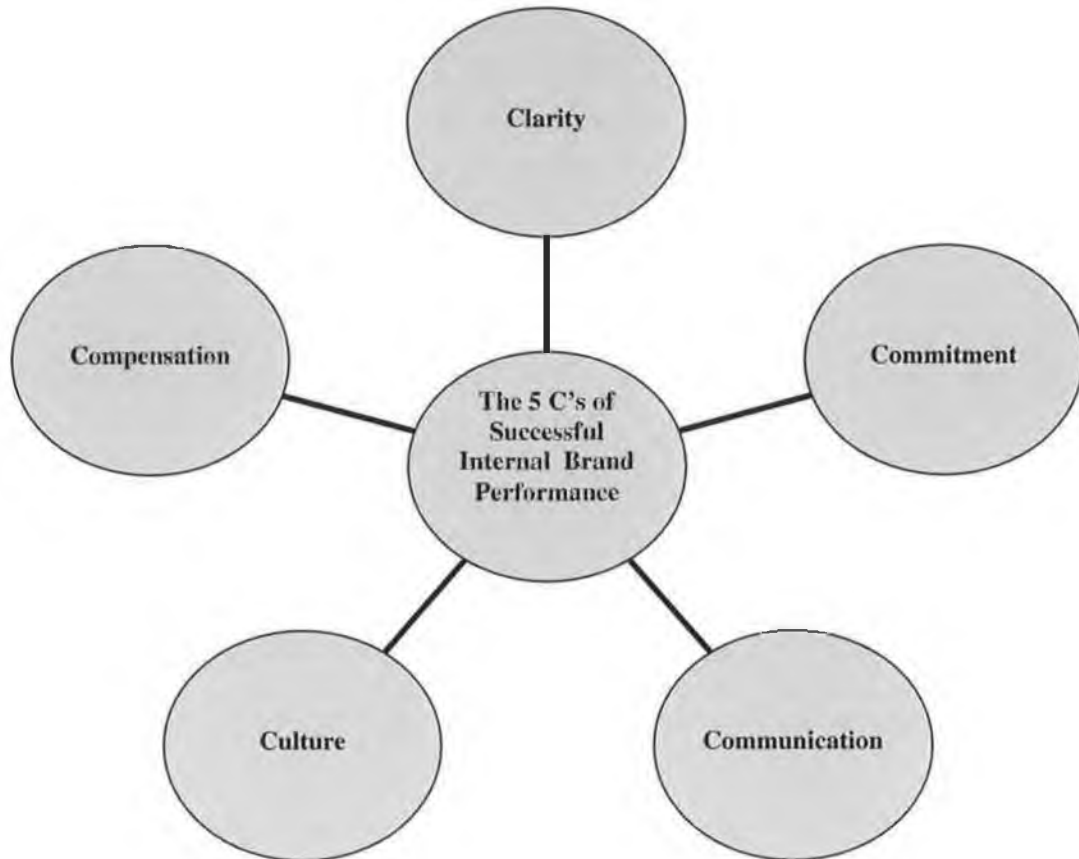
Bergstrom et al. (2002) believes that internal branding is comprised of three tenets. The first is effective communication of the brand with employees. The organisation must then ensure they believe the brand to be relevant and have value. Finally, the brand must be linked to every aspect of the organisation. The authors also advocate good communications and commitment amongst staff members which were two areas seen to be relevant in Mahnert and Torres (2007) study, suggesting that they are crucial elements to the success of internal branding. Bergstrom et al. (2002), use the framework “The 5 C’s” for successful internal branding performance. It is discussed, that none of these five



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functions is an entity on its own and all support each other and need constant evaluation and amendment. The following diagram was adapted from Bergstrom et al. (2002):

**Graph 1: The 5 C's of Successful Internal Brand Performance**



Adapted from Bergstrom et al. (2002)

Clarity is required first within the process, and is needed to ensure every member of the organisation understands the brand and how the organisation aims to communicate it to customers. It is only when members are clear about the values, that they can become committed to both.

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When this stage is reached, all members of the organisation must agree on a single vision for the brand. Employees may or may not be involved in creating the vision, but they all must have a common understanding of it and show commitment to it. Communication is essential throughout the entire process.

The brand messages must then be effectively communicated to all parties in the organisation. Leaders must be visibly leading by example, with constant reinforcement of messages. Even the most minute aspects of the organisation must successfully represent the brand, and every communication channel must be used. Organisational culture must be deeply understood by managers within the business and they must be prepared for any resistance they may face by employees. However, effective communication and strong consistent messages should help to minimise these issues.

Bergstrom et al.’s (2002, pg. 138) research found that compensation is a crucial element and that “employees who tend to be paid the least- customer service representatives- are actually most critical conduits of brand.” This implies that if an employee felt connected to a brand they would be willing to accept a lesser salary. However, employees may seek greater compensation for successfully maintaining the brand.

Bowen et al.’s (1991) theory would suggest that internal branding is an issue which must be addressed in the hiring process, while Mahnert and Torres (2007) and Bergstrom et al. (2002) suggest it is something which must be implemented organisation-wide. However, Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) believe that suggest that internal branding must be a combination of both human resource and marketing practices. They propose this with the following diagram:

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**Graph Two: Internal Branding Process**



Punjaisri and Wilson (2007, pg. 68)

Similarly, Scott Davis, a branding expert (cited in Keller, 2008 pg. 338) believes that internal branding is a mixture between hiring the right staff and implementing new processes organisation-wide. He feels that there are six principles for implementing internal branding successfully. First, the brand must be made relevant for all members of staff to understand and support the brand. The brand must then be made accessible and information regarding it should be easily accessible by staff. The brand should also be continually reinforced and this role lies with management from beginning and throughout. On-going brand education programmes should be implemented and staff need brand education which inspires them to align themselves with the brand. Brand-enhancing behaviour should be rewarded, and hiring practices should be aligned with the brand to ensure they fit with the organisation’s brand.

To aid these processes, it may be necessary to devise evaluation processes to ensure that internal branding is being carried effectively. Bergstrom et al. (2002) discusses how when SAAB endeavoured internal branding, they implemented “brand checkpoints” throughout the entire process to ensure that every aspect of the organisation remained aligned to the brand. Another useful tool the company used was an “internal brand brochure” which was given as an educational tool to members of staff. In this study it will be investigated

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as to whether managers make an effort to internally brand their organisation. If they do, it will be uncovered whether they use tools such as these and an enquiry can be made as to how managers rate the success of such tools.

However, despite having a good framework in place, it is evident from many theories that internal branding is an approach which needs strong leadership. The importance of the manager’s role is discussed in the next section.

### **3.4.2 The Role of Management in Internal Branding**

From Punjaisri and Wilson’s (2007) study, it is apparent that despite much of the internal branding literature being focused around staff, management play a vital role in orchestrating the process. Similarly, Abimbola and Vallaster (2007) state that it is the role of the owners/managers to take responsibility for successful branding within their organisation, and that they play a vital role in encouraging the entire organisation to work towards common goals.

Krake’s (2005, cited in Merrilees, 2007) theory corroborates with these two, stating that it is the manager’s passion which creates and drives the brand. Corporate culture and behaviour appear to be built around the ideology of the leader and thus help form organisational identity (Wickham 2001, cited in Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007). This was proven by Aurand’s et al. (2005) research which uncovered that 68% of the 221 respondents in their study believed it to be management who advocated brand messages within the organisation.

As previously discussed, theorists suggest that internal branding commences with the hiring process and many caution the potential pitfalls of failing to address this. Hoffman (1996) states that the resources a manager does not dedicate in ensuring the newly hired staff are suited to the job will be spent again, but ten times greater, trying to train these

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people, paying for their performance shortcomings, firing them, and beginning the process all over again. However, despite the importance placed on the hiring process management may be hindered in successfully implementing internal branding due to the limited availability of proven methods for hiring for personality (Bowen et al., 1991). Thompson et al. (1999) earlier suggested policy change within businesses. This may be applicable to the hiring process also. Often, in traditional hiring methods, management can actually stifle applicant’s personalities by having too rigorous policies and procedures (Bowen et al., 1991). King and Grace (2008) suggest socialising employees as a way in which management can change the process. This ensures that candidates fit in with the organisation and other members of staff. It places emphasis on their personality traits rather the skills in existing sets. Another way of evaluating potential job candidates is to test management views against staff views to determine whether they are successfully aligned (Thompson et al., 1999).

The manager’s role in internal branding does not end with the hiring process however. One of the main findings of King and Grace’s (2008) study, which focuses on having a training programme in place with regard to the brand, was that respondents deemed it to be a factor of successful service provision. They key challenge facing management is to ensure that they remain focused on internal branding and do not exert all of their activities on external branding initiatives.

Another challenge facing management faces is to understand what motivates employees. Management must successfully motivate employees to advocate the brand, and being forceful will have a negative result (King and Grace, 2008).

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### 3.4.3 Motivation

Hoffman (1996) describes motivation as what compels someone to do a job well. In King and Grace’s (1998, pg. 367) study, the authors found that staff who were effectively motivated and communicated with, felt attached to the brand and were most likely to enthusiastically work towards goals. One respondent of the study described their positive feelings regarding their organisation,

“[the] company spends a lot of time straight up talking about their philosophy and they tell you a lot of good stories...it was quite powerful really to get you thinking ‘I wouldn’t mind being part of that- making a difference’.”

It is emotional responses to the brand such as this, which the research aims to uncover in this study.

Branding expert, Scott Davis (cited in Keller, 2008 pg. 338) believes that if employees are to be “passionate brand advocates, they must understand what the brand is, how it’s built, what their organisation’s brand stands for, and what their role is on delivering the brand promise.” He believes that staff must hear, live and believe the brand. However, it is not always correct to assume that employees will simply be motivated for the emotional benefits of working for an organisation. Authors such as Bowen et al (1991), Punjaisri and Wilson (2007), Mahnert and Torres (2007), discuss the importance of having reward systems in place for employees who successfully represent the brand. It is important to note that people may be motivated differently and driven by different goals. The result is that reward systems may have to be multi-faceted or tailored to ensure successful implementation.

Despite any form of motivational tool being in place, businesses must ensure that staff members are first committed to the business and its brand. Garbarino and Johnson’s (1999,

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pg. 72) found through examination of existing literature that areas such as “personal identification with the organisation, psychological attachment, concern for the future welfare of the organisation, and loyalty” are some areas for which staff commitment arises.

Once staff are committed and effectively motivated, they can begin to make a positive contribution to the brand. It is for this reason that the next area of consideration is the role of staff in the internal branding process.

#### **3.4.4 The Role of Staff in Internal Branding**

The influence of staff on customer experience and brand perceptions is highly significant (Kotler and Keller, 2006). The employee plays a vital role in delivering the service quality guaranteed from the brand (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). For staff to have a positive rather than negative impact, Keller (2008, pg. 125) states that employees, in service businesses especially, must have an “up-to-date and deep understanding of the brand” and that it requires “continual open dialogue”. Customer satisfaction begins with trust, and trust often grows from the activities from the salesperson (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). Westbrook’s (1981, cited in Garbarino and Johnson, 1999) research supports this, and found that satisfaction in services arises from a number of key sources, one of these being staff’s performance. Burmann and Zeplin (2005, pg. 281) offers an in-depth explanation of how the employee’s role affects customer experience.

“Customer brand experience is driven by all customer-brand touch points, and many of these are determined by employees- not only those in the marketing department, but all employees who contribute directly or indirectly to the brand’s products, services and formal or informal communications. For this reason, all employees need to be familiar with the brand identity concept and

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be committed to live the brand internally and externally. If this is not the case, employees might easily undermine the advertising-driven expectations with their words and actions.”

Staff performance with regard to the brand in services is vital for a business’s success, and Burmann and Zeplin (2005) propose the concept of “pro-social behaviour” in which staff members perform above and beyond what is expected of them. This willingness to go above and beyond expectations will ensure that the brand will excel. It is the actions of the employees which reflect the brand in service businesses. This is particularly evident in King and Grace’s (2008, pg. 358) study in which the authors explain that “the creation of a strong brand and the deliverance of perceived quality are premised by employees’ ability to deliver on customer expectations.”

Similarly Aurand et al. (2005, pg. 167) state, “it is often said that employees will deliver the service that they themselves receive...a well-crafted brand identity is useless unless it is turned into real customer image through the actions of the employees.” However, it is important for managers to understand that most staff individuals are “heterogeneous”, resulting in different outcomes with customers from each (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007, pg. 59). Individuals possess their own values and beliefs and it is best to hire someone with those which are aligned to the organisation, as they can be very difficult to change (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007).

The main benefit of implementing internal branding successfully, according Bergstrom et al. (2002) are increased productivity. However, Bergstrom et al. (2002) emphasise the key role staff have to play. Referring to staff, they state, “it is the people...that are at the core of the brand” (Bergstrom et al., 2002, pg 135). King and Grace (2008, pg. 359) supports this, believing staff to be “capital too valuable to be lost” but expresses that staff are not likely to work to their full potential without successful internal branding practices in place. Similarly, Hoffman (1996) describe staff as a worthwhile investment; if a good



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effort is made to employ the right people for the organisation, then the task of training these employees should be significantly easier.

Hoffman (1996) believes that the three most important areas to consider when hiring people are their traits, chemistry, and experience. The first two are most relevant to this study and will be examined in further detail. Chemistry refers to how well the employees work with other people in the organisation and their alignment with the organisational culture. Also, matching staff traits to what the job requires is describe as being crucial to success.

The steps proposed above should be brand specific, rather than pertaining to the organisation itself. Burmann and Zeplin (2005, pp. 283- 284) discuss the idea of brand citizenship behaviour rather than organisational citizenship behaviour which is more common in marketing theory. This occurs when the performance of staff strengthens the brand. The authors have outlined seven ways in which the staff can enhance the brand. These include being helpful, both internally and externally, behaving in a way which reflects the brand and considering the impact of actions on the brand, having enthusiasm for the brand, being a good sport i.e. working for brand goals, even if it is sometimes inconvenient to do so, endorsing the brand even when staff are not in the work environment, having a constant willingness to improve personal “brand-related skills,” and being able to adapt to the brand as it changes over time.

When internal branding goals such as these are successfully achieved, staff members can become known as “brand ambassadors” (Barrett, 1998; Ambler and Barrow 1996 cited in Thompson et al., 1999), or “brand champions” (Mahnert and Torres, 2007 and Thompson et al., 1999). Both are phrases which refer to staff being successful advocates of the brand, and re-asserts that employees must being committed to the brand if it is to be successful (Thompson et al., 1999).

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With relevant theories discussed, and key contributing groups dealt with, it is necessary to examine the sector to which all of these theories will be tied. There were no studies uncovered which linked internal branding theories specifically to eco-tourism destinations, and this study aims to uncover if one exists in eco-tourism destinations in the North-Western region of Ireland.

### 3.5 Sustainable Tourism

Solomon (1992 pg. 26, cited in Morgan and Hunt, 1994 pg. 20) states that, “however competitive a particular industry may be, it always rests on a foundation of shared interests and mutually agreed-upon rules of conduct.” This is especially so in sustainable businesses.

Tourism itself only became an international industry approximately 25 years ago and many believe it is a main cause of damage to the environment. A trend towards eco-tourism became visible from 1985 when people began terminating visits to countries with degraded environments (Middleton and Hawkins, 1998). Middleton and Hawkins (1998, pg. 17) note that as the world becomes more populated, there is less availability “for whole populations to shift their settlement patterns and start again in a fresh environment” as they would have hundreds of years ago. Tourism is demanding on host environments, and tourists have been proven to use a greater amount of resources than residents. For example, in Mallorca in Spain, a tourist can use up to eight times more water than a resident on a daily basis. In European countries however, local authorities have begun to set out policies and rewards for good environmental practice (Middleton and Hawkins, 1998).

The increasing detriment of the environment has led the general public to become greener, and people are exercising their environmental beliefs through consumption practices (Todd, 2004). Governments are also intervening through legislation and rewards

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systems in a bid to save the environment. The Stern Report was published in 2006 in which a government official for the United Kingdom, Sir Nicholas Stern outlined how rapidly the environment was depleting. Actions were proposed for many countries to deter the negative impacts, and severe consequences for many were uncovered if an effort to save the natural environment was not made (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 2006).

A combination of these factors has led to an increase in popularity in eco or sustainable tourism. ‘Sustainable Tourism’ is based on the principals of sustainable development. It is proposed as a way of “minimising adverse impacts on local communities, our built heritage, landscapes, water resources, habitats, and species while supporting social and economic prosperity” (Failte Ireland, 2007 pg 13). However, in 2003, the European Commission felt that although efforts had been made to increase sustainable tourism policy, it had not gained much momentum in practice (Failte Ireland, 2007). It is for this reason that bodies such as Failte Ireland promotes the importance of sustainable tourism. In their 2007-2009 report, they have outlined the following 5 objectives for the period:

1. Make the environment central to sustainable tourism policy at local, national and regional levels.
2. Protect key environment and tourism resources.
3. Continue research investigating the relationship between tourism and the environment.
4. Encourage best practices in the tourism sector and aid the development of eco tourism.
5. Develop strategic partnerships to put the plan into practice.

(Failte Ireland, 2007 pg 17)

While this move towards a greener environment and protecting our natural resources, one must be wary of “greenwashing” (Todd, 2004). She states that while a consumer may be attracted by the ethical or environmental promise of a product or service, when

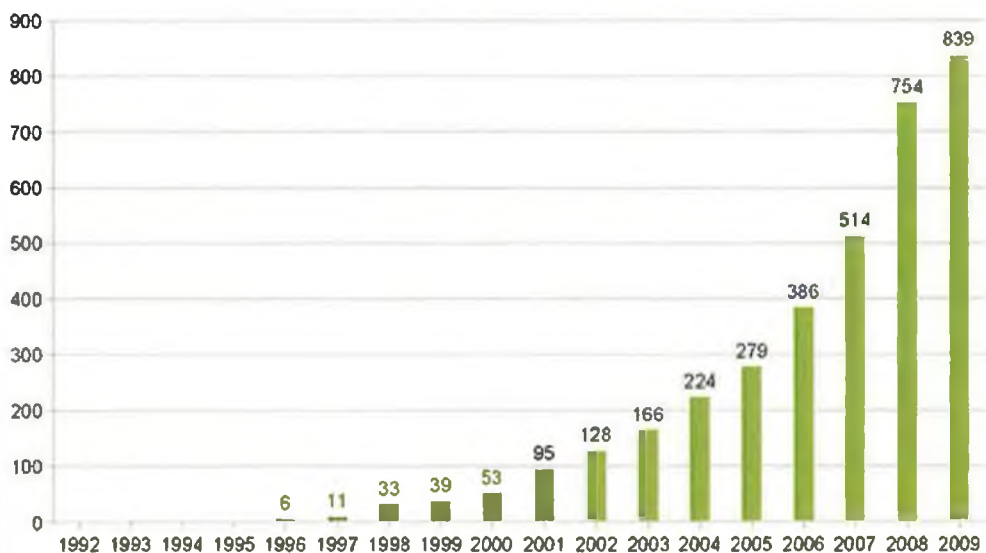
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“greenwashing” occurs, these are just empty promises made by a company, and are not followed through in practice. The concept of greenwashing also refers to the greening of certain aspects of a business to cover up actions which are less socially acceptable. There were several regulating bodies which were held in high regard by the businesses in the study which provide certification to prevent greenwashing from occurring.

The Greenbox created Ireland’s first eco-tourism label, “The Greenbox Ecotourism Label” in which 26 areas must be fulfilled to maintain the certification, with several optional areas included. The second most prominent body mentioned is the European Union Ecolabelling Board (EUEB) in conjunction with the European Commission, with regard to its eco- label, the “EU Flower”. Businesses must adhere to rigid standards to gain this certification, but the increasing number of businesses obtaining the certification would suggest that it has advantages (<http://ec.europa.eu>, 2009). This can be seen in the following diagram:

**Graph Three: Number of EU Flower Licences**

**Evolution of the Total Number of Licences from 1992 to 2009\***  
**\*Up to 30/04/2009**



(<http://ec.europa.eu>, 2009)

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Failte Ireland also produced several papers regarding eco-tourism, some with the help of the Greenbox.

Although there were no secondary sources uncovered which made the link between internal branding and eco-tourism destinations, this research aims to do so focusing on the North-Western region of Ireland.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

It is evident from the literature review, that internal branding is a relatively new topic, and several theorists discussed a shortage of literature regarding the topic (Thompson et al. 1991; Mahnert and Torres, 2007; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007; Merrilees, 2007. Similarly, there is limited literature surrounding eco-tourism (Middleton and Hawkins, 1998). Due to the relatively new nature of both concepts, combined with the fact that none of the research examined made links between internal branding and eco-tourism businesses, makes research very topical. The lack of published research was also highlighted by the fact that the same frameworks appeared in many theories. However, there were identifiable trends in all of the theories, such as the crucial role of staff and management, the necessity of continual cross functional communications, and organisation-wide commitment to the brand.

In the next chapter, the primary findings of this study will be elucidated and then discussed in relation to the theories and trends discussed in this chapter, which will lead to recommendations and conclusions being made with regard to this topic in Chapter Five.

## **Chapter Four- Findings and Analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The findings of this study will be presented and analysed within this chapter. They are outlined based on the respondent group analysed, and will be discussed in relation to the research objectives from Chapter One. Under each respondent group, sections of analysis will be divided into the categories by which the questions were devised. The majority of findings in this study are qualitative, as they express individual beliefs and feelings. This data was sourced from questionnaires administered to staff, in-depth interviews with managers and mystery shops conducted by customers and responses were analysed manually by the researcher. It is first necessary to give a profile of the respondents who participated in the study.

### **4.2 Profile of Respondents**

This study focused on three major eco-tourism destinations in the North- Western region of Ireland, comprising of Sligo, Leitrim, and Donegal. Within two of these businesses, members of staff were given questionnaires, eleven staff responses between the two businesses in total. In-depth interviews were then conducted with the managers. Management in one business (Business C) wished to partake in the study, but would not permit staff to be surveyed. Customer insight was crucial to this study, and this was achieved by conducting mystery shops to identify trends and to ensure important perceptions were included. Customer perceptions are not dealt with in depth as it had been initially planned to conduct interviews with them also. Time constraints did not allow this. The following is the break down of respondents:

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**Table 1: Breakdown of Respondents**

Type of Respondent	Number of Respondents
Total Businesses	3
Managers	3
Staff	11
Customers	6

All of the businesses studied have been in operation for more than eight years, employing less than ten members of staff. Only one of the businesses in the study, Business C, was owner-managed.

### **4.3 Staff Responses**

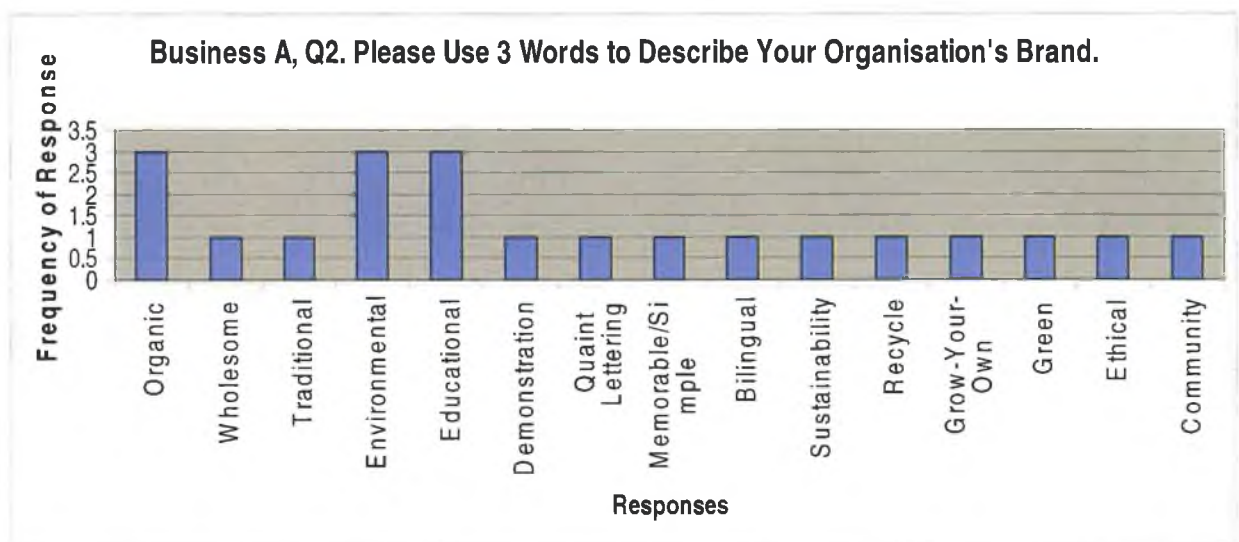
Staff responses were the first set of data gathered. The questionnaires consisted of fifteen questions which were categorised into sections (Appendix A). Responses will be analysed under the key themes of brand knowledge, perceptions of the level of branding within the workplace, and perceptions of staff members regarding their own role within the internal branding process. The first question of the questionnaire is not included in the analysis to protect respondent's confidentiality, as it was with regard to length of employment and role within the business. The questioning began with staff member's perceptions and knowledge about the external brand.

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### 4.3.1 Brand Knowledge

The first set of questions was created to determine staffs understanding of the external brand. Members of staff were first asked in this section to describe the brand of their organisation using just three words. It is important to note that staff members were not given a menu of choice in this section and were allowed to give any answer they wished. This was done to identify if all staff could give consistent answers regarding the brand. Responses for Business A are shown in the following table:

**Graph Four: Staff Description of Brand (Business A)**



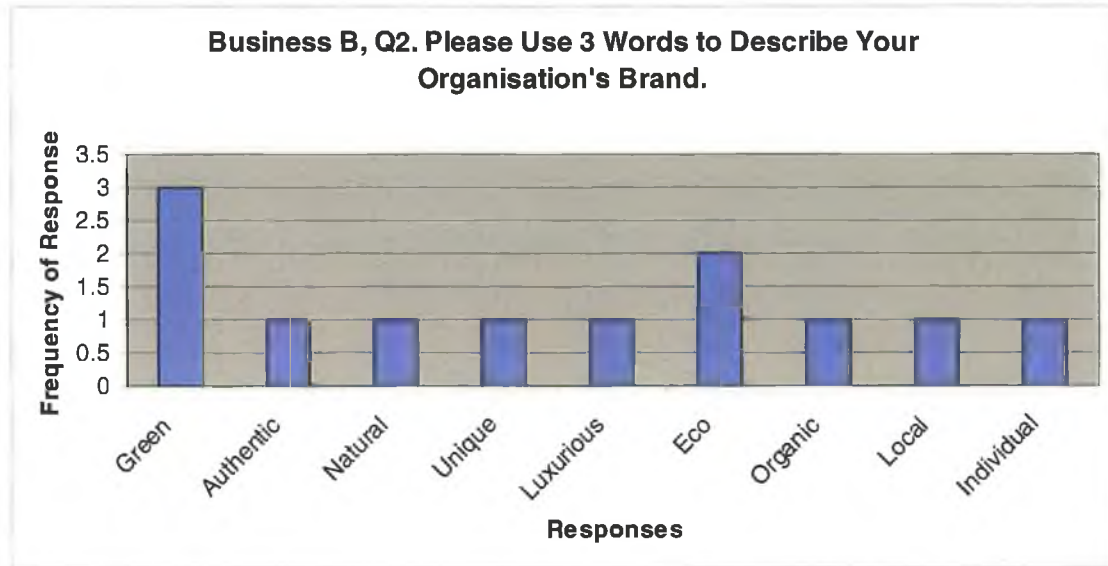
There were only three responses which were repeated more than once. The responses “Organic”, “Environmental”, and “Educational” were each mentioned by three respondents.

Staff members in Business B, when posed with the same question gave the following responses:



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**Graph Five: Staff Description of Brand (Business B)**



The most frequently given answers were “Green” and “Eco” with three and two responses respectively.

Despite the study emphasising internal branding, Burmann and Zeplin (2005) note that for businesses to be successful when endeavouring internal branding process, they must have a strong external brand. This is to ensure that the messages and values which are internalised correlate with the messages being projected to customers. However, despite some similar answers given by staff regarding this question, it was apparent that there was inconsistency in answers amongst members of staff, suggesting the messages they receive about the external brand may be unclear.

The next question with regards to the external brand asked staff members to consider their brand’s role within the eco-tourism sector. This question was asked to determine how staff perceived their brand’s performance with regards to eco-tourism. When asked if they felt that the term “eco-tourism” successfully represented their brand, 100% of

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respondents in both answered in the positive. When asked to elaborate as to how they felt their brand did this, answers from both businesses included:

“Sustainable visitor destination”

“People interested in sustainable living can gain a lot from visiting...”

“We provide an eco-friendly destination for tourists”

“EU Flower supports all claims, visitors see evidence on arrival.”

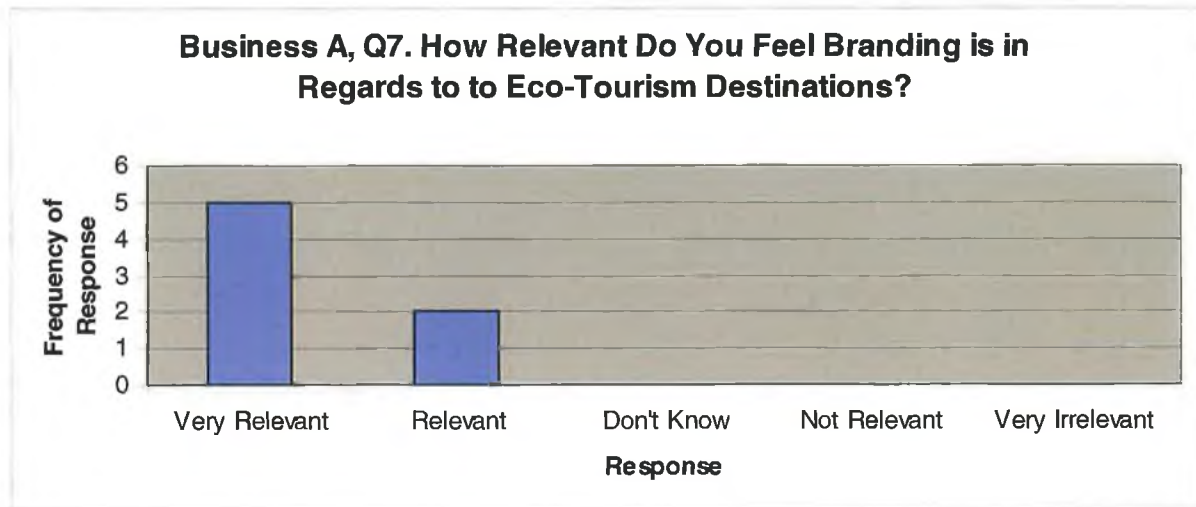
“We are used as an example of best practice... EU Flower proves our claims.”

It is clear from the responses by both **Business A** and **B** that the majority of staff members in the study had a clear understanding of how their brand fit into the category of eco-tourism destination. This was positive, as it revealed that staff had deeper knowledge of the brand.

The next question pertinent to this section asked staff members how relevant they felt branding was with regard to eco-tourism destinations. As staff members stated in the previous question that they felt their brand was a successful representation of eco-tourism, it was vital then to uncover what how important they viewed branding as a marketing tool to be within the sector. The majority of staff members in **Business A** felt it that it was very relevant, with the rest believing that it was relevant, illustrated in the diagram:

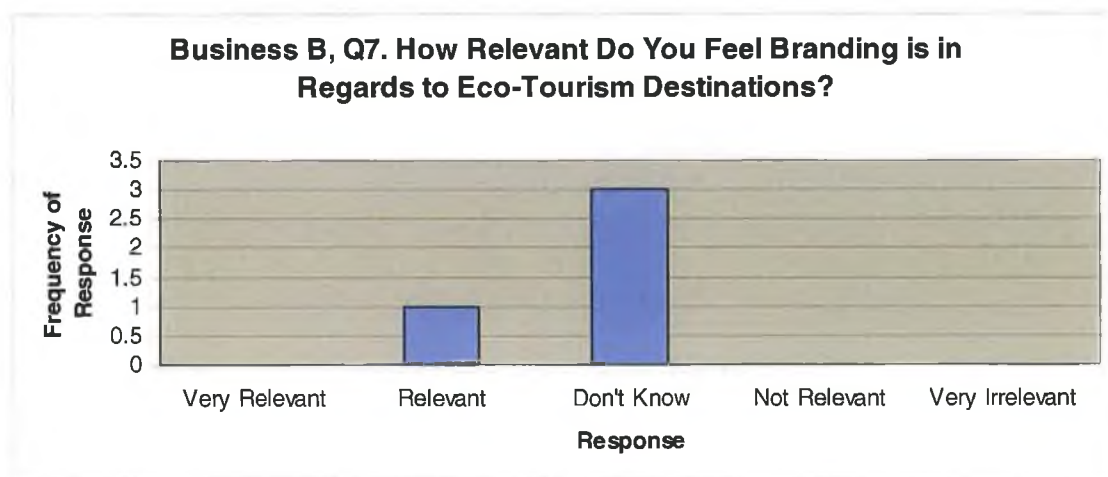
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**Graph Six: Staff’s Perception of Branding’s Relevance in Eco-Tourism (Business A)**



Within Business B, there was not as positive a response as in Business A. Only one member of staff felt that branding was relevant with the remainder of staff responding with a “don’t know” response.

**Diagram Seven: Staff’s Perception of Branding’s Relevance in Eco-Tourism (Business B)**



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If the results from Q.6 are measured against the results of Q.7, it would appear that while staff members in both businesses feel that their brand is a successful representation of an eco-tourism brand, it is only staff members in Business A who feel that it is relevant to have a strong brand in the eco-tourism sector.

This was further reinforced by the next question in which respondents were asked if being an eco-tourism brand brought any benefits to the organisation. Staff members in Business A, again had a strong understanding of their brand, giving responses such as:

1. “It helps us to be part of the national and international eco-tourism movement to encourage more visitors and... participants.”
2. “Eligibility for certain organisations and websites”
3. “Encourages people interested in environmental concerns to visit”
4. “It is currently fashionable so will get attention from a growing number of people”

Despite the majority of staff members (75%) in Business B stating that they were unsure as to the relevance of branding eco-tourism destinations, responses to Q.8 showed that staff could see the benefits of being an eco-tourism brand. They stated that it:

- A. “Makes us stand out from other businesses, makes us more sustainable”
- B. “Eco-tourism getting lots of publicity. Popular at the moment”
- C. “Appreciated in the current climate”
- D. “Eco- tourism is such a growing trend, more people are looking for green businesses for leisure.”

The responses show that some themes in the answers emerged from both businesses, including differentiation (seen in responses 1. and A.), catering to changing tastes, attracting a growing number of green-consumers (seen in responses 3., 4., B., and D.), the

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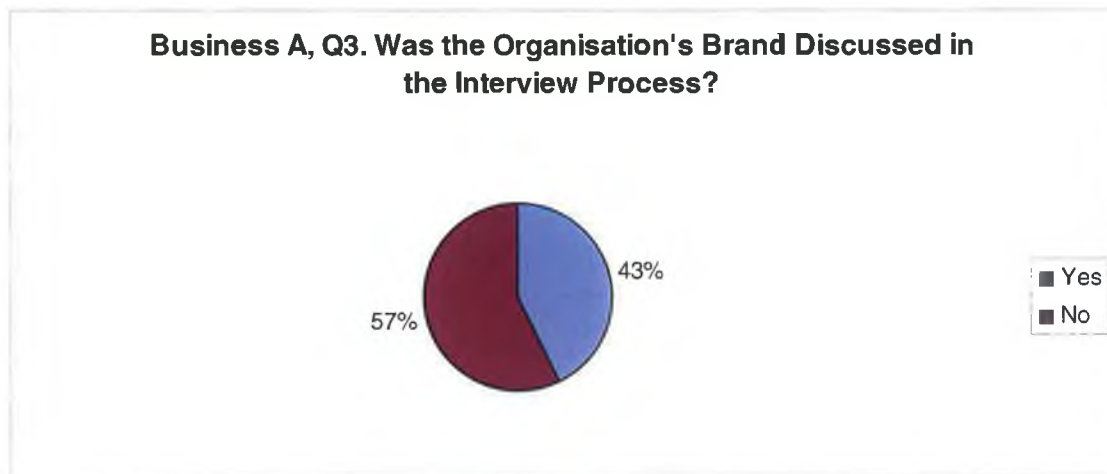
fact that businesses become eligible for certain awards and certification (response 2.), and works with governmental policy shift towards protecting the environment (responses 1. and 2.). The responses from these questions show that staff in both businesses have a clear understanding of the benefits that having a strong external eco-brand brings to the organisation brings. Some of the responses correlate with Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) who believe that branding helps to differentiate and can lead to competitive advantage. In the case of this study, it is witnessed through the award of certification, and attracting a growing niche of customers, all the while having a positive impact on society.

#### **4.3.2 Perceptions of the Level of Internal Branding in the Workplace**

The first two questions in this section were aimed to uncover staff perceptions of internal branding in regards to the hiring process. This was because importance was placed in the theory on adapting hiring processes and education programmes for staff for successful internal branding. In Business A, more than half of the staff questioned (57%) felt that it had not been discussed in the interview process, evidenced in the following diagram.

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**Graph Eight: Branding in the Interview Process (Business A)**



Of the 43% of staff who said they believed it had been, when asked to elaborate, responses included:

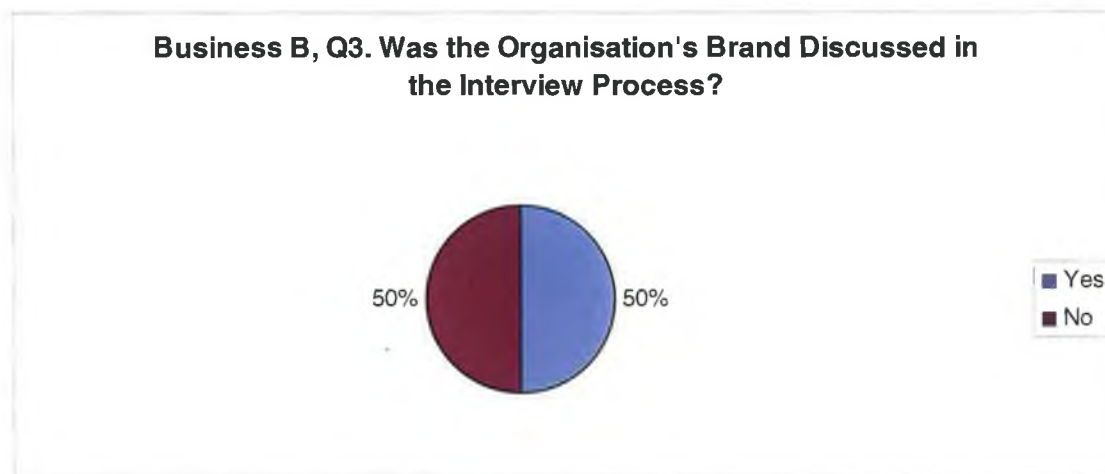
- “I was asked to explain what I knew of the ethos...”
- “Manager explained aims and ethos...”
- “Question on commitment to... ethos”

However, despite some members of staff within Business A responding that the brand had been discussed in the interview process, when asked had they received any training with regard to the brand 100% of respondents specified that they had not (Appendix A, Question 4).

Business B’s responses were similar regarding these two questions, with half of respondents stating that the brand had been discussed in the interview process and half stating that it had not, which can be seen in the diagram below:

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**Graph Nine: Branding in the Interview Process (Business B)**



For those who responded that it had been discussed, they stated the areas of discussion to be,

“Use of organic/local food”

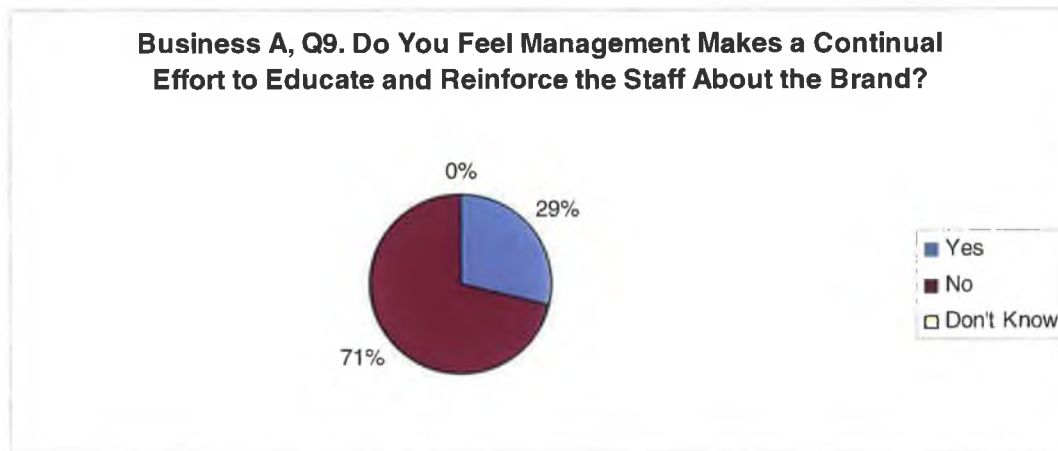
“Green Brand- How it would affect my role (use of towels, recycling).”

With regard to receiving formal education about the brand (Appendix A, Question 4), again similar to Business A, 100% of respondents in Business B said they had not received any. The lack of education about the brand may lead to attempted internal branding efforts to fail in both businesses, as evidence suggests that staff need education regarding the brand to become successful advocates of it (e.g. Bergstrom et al., 2002; Keller 2008).

The next question with regard to perceptions about internal branding in the workplace was Q.9. It asked respondents if they felt that management made a continual effort to educate and reinforce the brand. This question moved away from the hiring process and more towards regular practice within the businesses. In Business A, 29% said that they felt management did reinforce the brand.

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**Graph Ten: Staff Perceptions of Internal Branding Education (Business A)**



Of those who said, when asked to elaborate on how management did so within Business A, responses included:

“Regularly monthly meetings, monthly newsletter”

“Most mornings we have a 5-10 minute discussion on what’s new and where we are at.”

Although one member of staff in Business B felt that management did make a continual effort to reinforce the brand, when asked to elaborate it was clear the response was contradictory:

“Our emphasis is not so much about the brand but about the ethos of the business”

Although brand and ethos are linked, it is important to note that they are not the same. The member of staff which replied “no” felt that the organisation

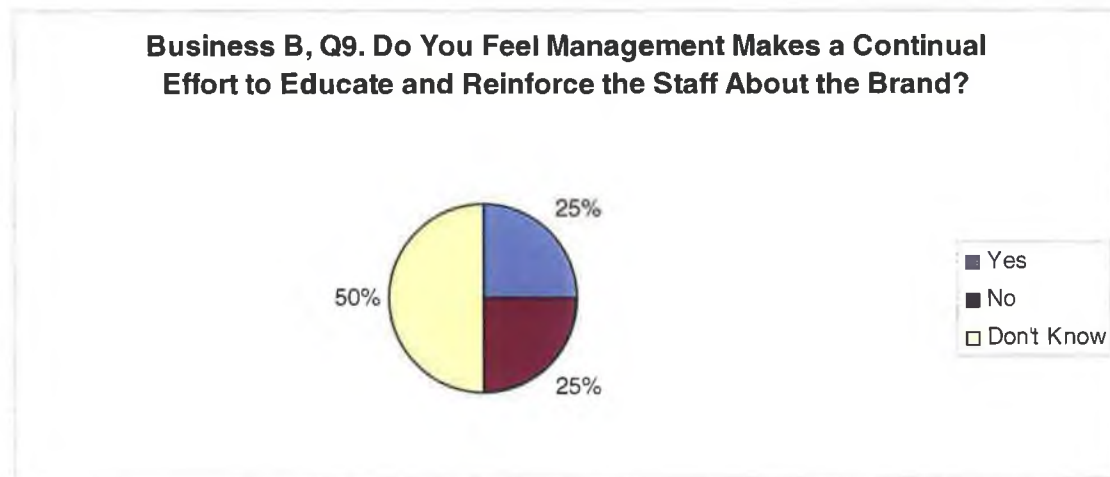
“Reinforce our environmental policy but not brand specifically.”



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Half of the staff members in Business B were unsure as to whether management did or did not reinforce the brand. The findings are presented in the following diagram:

**Graph Eleven: Staff Perceptions of Internal Branding Education (Business B)**

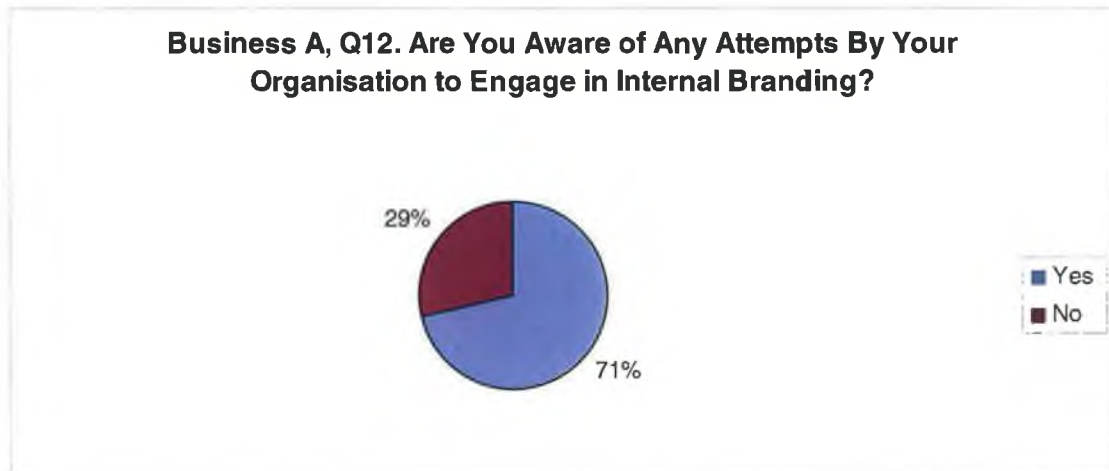


Bergstrom et al., (2002) and Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) suggest that internal branding requires managers to make a continual effort to educate and reinforce the brand. However the findings in this study show that the majority of staff in both businesses felt the management did not do this.

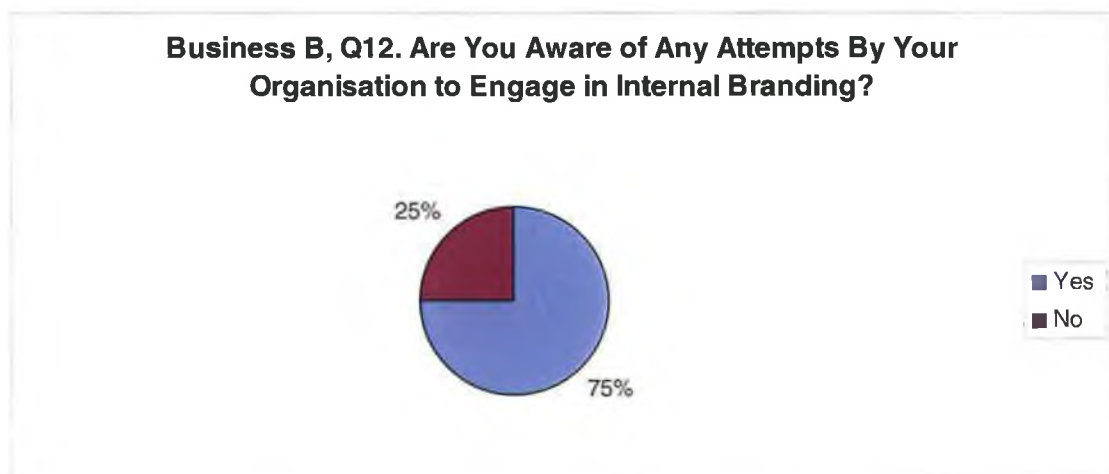
It was later then in the questionnaires that staff were asked outright if they believed that management engaged in internal branding. Both businesses answered positively with more than 70% of respondents in each stating that they believed this to be true, which is evident in the diagrams below.

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**Graph Twelve: Staff Awareness of Internal Branding (Business A)**



**Graph Thirteen: Staff Awareness of Internal Branding (Business B)**



Despite the responses being positive, they are contradictory to what responses to previous questions in the section suggest. However, some staff members appeared to have a clear knowledge of how internal branding was implemented within their organisation. In Business A, when staff were asked to elaborate on their answers, responses included:

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“Interview process includes asking about knowledge of and attitude to [Business A’s] aims and objectives.”

“All staff need to understand and subscribe to the ethics of sustainability to be able to keep customers informed...”

“People who join the [business] are attracted to us because they have similar values”

Despite the staff in Business B feeling that the organisation did engage in internal branding, none of their responses clarified as to how management did so.

#### **4.3.3 Perceived Role in Internal Branding**

The first question on the staff questionnaires with regards to this section asked how they communicated the brand to customers. This was created with the aim of uncovering what staff viewed their role to be with regard to internal branding. Responses varied depending on the role of each staff member. In Business A, staff members seemed to have a clear grasp of how they expressed the brand values of the business. Responses included:

“It is explained to the visitors”

“Via press releases, open days and guided tours”

“Being as helpful as possible and giving as much information as we can”

“I discuss the activities... and the benefits”

“The brand values... communicated practically through demonstration and training... reinforced through interaction face-to-face, over the phone, through website.”

In Business B answers were similar to Business A, as they too included both the technical ways of communication the brand values, and the more personal approaches:

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“Through our brochures, websites and press”

“Through the marketing, conversation on arrival”

“The use of organic/ local ingredients”

It was important to understand what staff perceived their role to be because theorists such as Kotler and Keller (2006) and Burmann and Zeplin (2005) assign staff a pivotal role in communication brand values to customers.

The next question relating to this section was Q.10 which asked respondents to describe their personality with just three words. The responses given by respondents can be seen in the following diagram.

**Graph Fourteen: Staff Personality (Business A)**



It is important to note that for question ten in Business A, there was one non-response. None of the respondents used words like “green”, “organic”, “environmental” etc., which they had previously used to describe the brand of the organisation, to describe themselves. However, when respondents were later asked in question eleven, “Can you

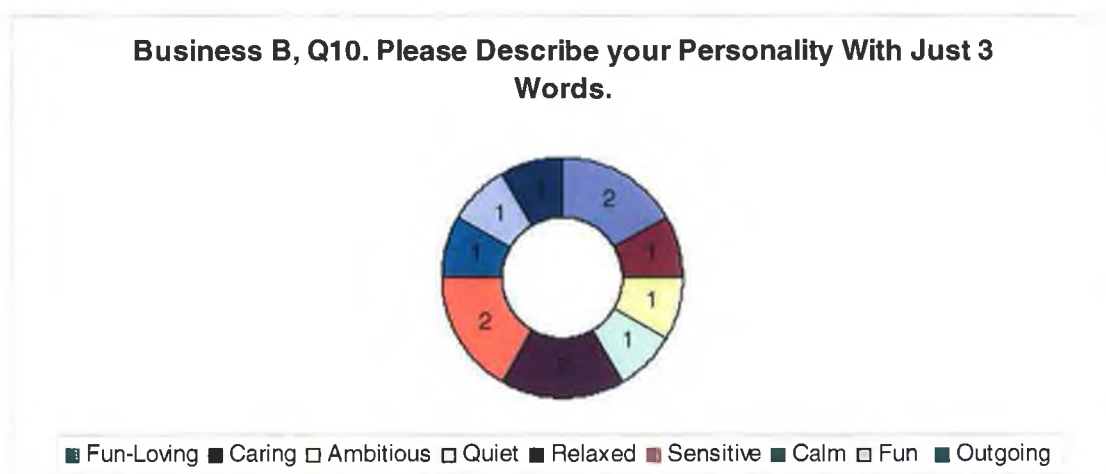
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identify anyway in which your personality compliments the organisations brand?” the majority of responses were positive, with only one “no” answer, and one non response. Responses included:

- “Humour will always compliment any brand.”
- “My personal beliefs and how I live my life reflects the brand ethos.”
- “My own commitment to sustainable lifestyle reflected in the way I deal with queries etc.”
- “Willingness to learn more”
- “I am creative in terms of new marketing opportunities for the brand.”

This would suggest that although the staff did not identify any exact personal quality matches with that of the brand, many of them felt that the qualities they did possess complimented the brand. Similarly, in Business B none of the staff members specified personality traits and qualities matching the description they had given for the brand. The adjectives they used to describe themselves can be seen in the following table:

**Graph Fifteen: Staff Personality (Business B)**



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When staff were asked in Business B if they could identify any way in which their personality complimented the organisation’s brand only one of the staff members specified how their own personality complimented the brand, stating:

“Easy going attitude compliments [Business B]”

The rest of the respondents made more general statements, rather than how they personally complimented the brand.

“We like to have a relaxed and personal feel to the business. A sense of humour is integral here for staff to get on and for customers.”

“Compliments role as therapist. Not brand.”

“Relaxed atmosphere with staff”

The next question which was relevant to this section asked staff members what they felt their customers valued most in good service provision. This question led to the following and final question in this section, question (Q.14). Question 14 asked staff how they delivered the features which they specified as most important. It was significant to understand this, because in much of the literature examined in the previous chapter staff were seen as crucial to the brand in service businesses, as they are often the main touchpoint that the customer has with the brand. Successful service provision is often rated by staff performance so it was necessary to determine if staff knew what their customers expected from the brand and how they delivered these expectations. In Business A, staff felt that their customers valued,

“...plenty of information and advice.”

“Good customer service, high level of training, interesting and stimulating environment”

“Helpfulness, information, good food”

“Knowledge... good selection... friendly service”

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“Quality product... a holistic experience”

“Openness and willingness to help”

“Quality, friendliness, sincerity”

The staff members in Business A specified that they delivered these features by,

“Being well informed, patient and humorous”

“Through staff training and constant updating...”

“Being customer focused and doing the job to the best of my ability”

“Give accurate information, am polite and helpful to customers; keep myself informed to provide a better service”

In Business B, staff members also specified quality and friendliness to be areas which their customers value but also included “personalised attention”, which was mentioned twice. When asked how they delivered these features, their answers were very different to those of Business A.

“Approach each customer individually, and keep high standards. No use being “eco” if poor quality”

“Treat each client uniquely, don’t rush”

“Attention to detail”

“Cater a visit to individuals”

Once the staff responses were gathered and analysed, the findings were used in interviews with the managers of the businesses in which they are employed. These responses are dealt with in the next section.

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#### **4.4 Management Responses**

Within this section, management perceptions are dealt with under the three headings of brand management, hiring and education of staff with regards to internal branding, and internal brand management. Manager interviews were all formed around eighteen questions, but each varied slightly to suit the business or to accommodate the information given in the staff questionnaires. The questions which manager interviews were based around can be found in Appendix B. Like the previous section, external brand management is dealt with first.

##### **4.4.1 Brand Management**

With regards to the external brand, there was only one business which seemed to have a strong grasp of their external brand. Business A’s manager, when asked about the brand, gave a very clear answer as to what the brand of the organisation was and the response was “green...ethical, sustainable and organic.” When asked what they perceived the role of their brand to be within the organisation, Manager A expressed a very comprehensive understanding of the role of branding within their organisation, responding that it is

“Something which consumers and customers can identify with strongly... which is understandable... promotes our business, makes us more successful, more profitable... a clear kind of message or statement of the organisation.”

Manager A believes that by branding their organisation, it brings many benefits such as making the business more identifiable and clearer for customers to understand. It was here that Manager A became the only respondent to make an un-prompted reference to internal branding, stating that, “internally it helps the staff to understand who we are and what we do.” However, despite the fact that Manager A appears to understand the brand



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of the organisation quite well, and the benefits it brings, the respondent later highlights that it is not something which they have considered “in too great of detail.” This would suggest that currently, despite no formal external branding efforts being made, the organisation has strong set of values and beliefs which they adhere by, and that the brand may have evolved naturally from these.

When presented with the same series of questions regarding brand management, the manager in Business B did not express as clear an understanding of the brand. Manager B specified that they focus more on their “environmental policy and... eco-tourism” rather than the brand itself. The manager explained that it something which they also do not think a great deal about, and they find it challenging to pinpoint what exactly it is that their brand entails because of the various functions it carries out. However, despite the fact that Business B does not focus on branding, the manager makes reference to the brand changing over the years because of changing clientele. This would suggest that they do engage in some level of branding, but again, it is not done formally, and that is not perceived as a crucial function within the organisation. Despite this, Manager B stated that if the brand was related to the values and the ethos of the business then it was something which is “really beneficial.”

Similarly, the manager in Business C the manager also specified that the organisation did not engage in an adequate level of branding and the manager states “I definitely haven’t sorted it out well enough at all.” However, the impending updating of their website was seen as a focal point for evaluating their brand. Manager C felt that the main benefits of external branding were “positional” accepting that benefits could be forthcoming *if* they engaged in branding.

Existing internal branding literature advocates the idea of a strong external brand. Despite the fact that all of the managers within the study understood the benefits branding brings, it was apparent that none of them implemented formal processes for the external brand. Only one manager was able to provide an argument in favour of not engaging too heavily

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in external branding. The manager in Business C described their brand as “pale green” and cautioned that guests should not be “preached at” about eco-tourism, and are informed about the brand when they seek out the information themselves.

Managers in all three businesses were asked who was responsible for the branding in the business. In Business A, it was mainly the co-manager who was responsible. In Business B it was the owner, and in Business C, it was Manager C. However, all of the managers specified that staff input and ideas were considered within the branding process. The idea of cross functional communication and input from every level of the organisation with regard to the brand was examined in the literature, and it is positive to discover that all of the businesses within the study take staff ideas into account with regards to the branding process.

Similar to the staff questionnaires, the managers were then questioned on how they felt their brand fits into the category of “eco-tourism” to develop an understanding of how well managers knew their brand. Two out of the three businesses in the study seemed to have a clear grasp of how their brand contributed to the eco-tourism sector in the North-Western Region of Ireland. Manager A discussed their organic certification with regards to this question, and how they would not have achieved that without adhering to certain standards and that it puts them “on the map as an eco-tourism destination.”

Manager B was also able to clearly explain their contribution to the eco-tourism sector, explaining that Failte Ireland use them as a benchmark for other businesses to aspire to. However this again is in relation to practice rather than branding, although having support from a well-recognised tourism organisation would strengthen the business’s brand, and all of the managers and some staff throughout the study discussed the role of their organic certification as being significant to the business.

Manager C did not express as great involvement in eco-tourism as the other two businesses. Manger C feels that they themselves need to take a greater interest in tourism

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within their business, and that they have been there so long, that it hard to see the business for what it is; and eco-tourism destination. The manager makes a point here which was evident from the literature review of the importance of the leader within internal branding. Management must encourage staff to work with the brand (Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007) and lead by example (Aurand et al., 2005). This is something which is not done in Business C, as expressed by the manager.

An idea to be considered which emerged in this section was whether branding the eco-tourism offering helped the organisation to attract a particular or desired type of clientele. Manager C felt that, while “theoretically” it was aimed at environmentally conscious people, they received all types of consumers because of the business’s geographic location. Manager B discusses how, because of changing tastes and economic conditions, their clientele base is growing and changing but that they do normally attract people specifically looking for eco-holidays. However, the clientele which the brand attracted was not something which was investigated, as it only emerged at the end of the study.

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#### **4.4.2 Hiring and Education**

The role of hiring and education with regard to internal branding was something which was discussed. Managers were asked if they believed it was relevant to align staff to the brand. The manager in Business A felt it to be “fundamental” and suggests that it is even more so important within eco-friendly businesses because

“We’re not... selling cans of dog food... we’re engaged in something which is... an aspect of people’s lives and beliefs and attitudes.”

Manager B also believes that it is vital to hire someone which is aligned to the business. The manager believes that if staff are not aligned to the brand then it would be “worrying in terms of the customer” as to what messages the staff were conveying. This supports previous evidence which suggests staff are the main touchpoint of the brand in service businesses, and thus their successful alignment to the brand is crucial.

Manager C also responded positively to the question, making reference to one staff member in particular, that she would not be employed there long term if she was not “on side” with the business.

Once the importance of aligning staff was accepted, managers were asked if they looked for specific traits when considering a new candidate for employment. Manager C made the valid point that it is difficult to judge an applicant’s personality in the traditional hiring process. The manager discusses how it is not easy to tell what a person is like from their CV or from an interview, and it has often happened within the organisation that people were misjudged, both positively and negatively in the interview process. This supports the findings expressed in the existing literature regarding the challenges in traditional hiring (e.g. Bowen et al., 1991). However, Manager C reinforces the idea of altering the hiring process and states that they have a trial period to see how they “get on” and they can make a “judgement very quickly on whether it works or not.” This is similar

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to Bowen et al.’s (1991) theory of socialising a staff member to examine how well they will work in the organisation.

Manager A states that they do look for a certain type of candidate, and people are assessed based on how well they answer interview questions. One of the main questions in their hiring process regards the applicant’s commitment to the ethos of the business, and manager feels it highlights how suited they are to the brand. However, the manager in Business A goes on to explain that they are in the process of altering their current hiring process and moving towards

“Job descriptions which are not just a list of tasks and duties, but they also contain personal specifications, and the personal specification would be... values and skills and qualities that we’re looking for in an ideal candidate, over and above... their ability to actually just do the duties and the tasks in the job description. We want them to have a kind of attitude or approach to working in [Business A] which would be most productive to the organisation.”

This supports Bowen et al.’s (1991) approach of hiring someone who fits in with the organisation rather than merely possessing the skills to complete the functions of the job.

The manager in Business B expressed that within their business, it is necessary for a potential candidate to be hard working but also to be easygoing and have a sense of humour. The manager explained that if all staff members are not aligned, not only to the brand, but also each other, it can have a negative impact on the business. This viewpoint was also supported by Manager C, who takes the input of other employees into consideration when hiring a new staff member, as the manager specifies that it will be the staff which will be working more frequently alongside them.

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Although management responses suggest that they require a certain applicant, it was noted that only Manager C specified specific personal qualities and traits which were important for potential candidates.

When managers were asked if they discussed the brand in the hiring process, the manager in Business B stated that they did not have a formal hiring process and that it is “mentioned from the outset” but there is no procedure for education. This is contradictory to what the staff expressed (only 50% said it was discussed in the hiring process). It was specified earlier that within Business A, the brand is discussed in the interview process, but 57% of respondents said that it was not. The manager later states however that they believe the brand to be “implicit” and they believe it is for this reason that it is rarely questioned.

In Business C, the manager expressed that the brand is discussed with staff members upon employment, but not with all members of staff. This is because they do not see it as being relevant to everyone’s role. This suggests that despite evidence placing importance on every member within an organisation in the internal branding process, this was not a belief of Manager C. All of the businesses in the study expressed that they did not have a formal training process with regards to the brand and in Businesses A and B, this correlated with the fact that 100% of staff in both businesses expressed that they did not receive any formal training with regards to the brand. This is detrimental to the success of any internal branding effort.

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#### **4.4.3 Internal Brand Management**

The next section of questioning was created to develop an understanding of how leaders continually managed the internal brand. The first question evaluated the communication of internal brand messages. The manager in Business A stated that there

“Probably isn’t a huge consensus among the staff involved of being trained or made aware of their environment, of the company they work for”

This statement correlates with the fact that 71% of staff members felt that management did not make a continual effort to reinforce the brand in Business A. Manager A feels that for some staff roles within the organisation, it is not relevant for them to be continually trained about the brand, but the manager acknowledges that “maybe it should” be an area which is discussed beyond the hiring process.

Manager B states that it would be something which is casually discussed within their business but again, as with the hiring process, there are no formal procedures in place. This would explain why only 25% of staff respondents felt that brand messages were continually communicated and half of the respondents were unsure. If brand communications were transformed into a formal procedure and less of a casual occurrence staff may begin to feel that management does continually reinforce the brand, thus removing any ambiguity. Again, as stated before, the manager in Business C felt that it was only relevant to continually discuss the brand with certain staff members. The idea of some staff members not being relevant to the internal branding process is something which goes against the literature explored in Chapter Three in which it is made clear that every member of staff should be included in the internal branding process so that they may be successful brand advocates both within and away from the work environment.

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Discussion then took place regarding the communication of brand values to customers. When asked as to their opinion on staff's role to be in the process, the manager in Business A felt their brand values were communicated by how they operate, and that their business approach is quite “defined.” He stated that values are communicated to visitors through this unique business approach. Manager A feels that the majority of staff play a vital role in communicating brand messages, especially those who come into contact with the public on a regular basis.

Manager B felt that brand values were communicated by speaking with customers about it, and felt that staff's role is crucial, as staff would be their “main point of reinforcing” the brand.

Manager C felt that the business takes a more relaxed approach to communicating their eco-tourism brand values, though they have been encouraged by eco-tourism groups to emphasise it more. Manager C feels, again, that some members of staff have more responsibility in communicating the brand than others. Even then, the manager expresses that the staff have a role in communicating the brand values “if they feel like talking” about it.

As the theory suggests, internal branding is a concept which must be continually communicated to staff as they have a vital role in promoting the brand amongst customers (e.g. Bergstrom et al., 2002; Mahnert and Torres, 2007). It was apparent from the responses, that two out of the three managers had a strong belief that staff had a role in communicating the brand to the customer, and yet it is evident from the research that there is little to no training or reinforcement with regard to the brand in these businesses. It was already noted in Business B that the brand had to change to meet the needs of changing tastes and clientele and this may be the case in other businesses also. In a dynamic and rapidly changing business environment, it may be necessary for these businesses to re-evaluate their practices.



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The focus of this study now shifts to the customer perspective which was gained through the use of the mystery shopping process.

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## **4.5 Customer Responses**

The mystery shop comprised of twelve questions/ statements for the customer to evaluate the staff performance in relation to the brand, and the mystery shop scorecard given to customers can be found at Appendix C. The questions were divided into sections. For all questions apart from Q.9 and Q.11, customers were given a statement with which they were asked to strongly agree, agree, indicate that they had no opinion, disagree, strongly disagree, or indicate that they did not know. The responses were evaluated under sections including perceptions of staff alignment to the brand, staff/ brand performance, and the brand in relation to eco-tourism. For Business A, there were three mystery shops conducted, for Business B, there was one mystery shop conducted, and for Business C, there were two mystery shops conducted. The first section was created with regards to customers perceptions of how well the staff were aligned to the brand.

### **4.5.1 Perceptions of Staff Alignment to the Brand**

It is important to note first what the perception of the level of branding was within each business by the customers. The first statement presented to the respondents was “the organisation is strongly branded.” For Business A two respondents agreed, while one strongly agreed. In Business B, the respondent strongly disagreed. For Business C, both respondents disagreed with the statement. These responses correlate with what managers specified their level of branding to be.

With regards to Business A, there were a number of responses which signified that the staff were successfully aligned to the brand. The following questions were devised to gain insights about how well the consumers perceived the staff to be aligned to the brand. Two of the mystery shoppers strongly agreed with all of the following statements, while the other agreed with all of them:

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(Q.2) “The staff live the brand.”

(Q.3) “Staff personality suited the brand of the organisation.”

(Q.4) “Staff were knowledgeable about the brand.”

(Q.5) “Staff made a positive contribution to the brand.”

All three strongly agreed that staff played a role in successful service delivery (Q.7). This would indicate that within Business A, customers perceived staff to be successfully aligned to the brand. This finding supports previous research that successful alignment of staff to the brand affects overall satisfaction positively, and may be a reason why Business A has a membership scheme with approximately 400 members (as specified by Manager A in the interview).

When examining Business B under the same mystery shop scorecard statements the mystery shopper strongly agreed with statements two, three and four and agreed with statement five. The mystery shopper also agreed that staff played a role in successful service delivery (Q.7). This would indicate that the customer believed the staff to be aligned to the brand, though not as strongly as Business A.

When evaluating Business C under the same statements on the mystery shop score card, shoppers were posed with the statement “Staff live the brand.” (Q.2.). One respondent disagreed, while the other stated “Don’t Know”. In regards to statements three, four and five both respondents agreed with all of them. One respondent stated that they disagreed with “the staff lived the brand” and also specified that they agreed with question six, “The actions of the staff were at odds with the brand offering.” Despite this, the shopper strongly agreed that staff played a role in successful service delivery (Q.7). The second mystery shopper agreed with (Q.7) and strongly disagreed with (Q.6) which was contradictory to the other mystery shopper’s answer. In Business C, because of conflicting answers from mystery shoppers, both positive and negative about the staff and

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their performance with regards to the brand, it is difficult to ascertain whether the staff are successfully aligned to the brand.

Garbarino and Johnson (1999) expressed earlier that customer satisfaction stems from the activities of the staff, and alignment of employees will result in the brand being successfully expressed to the customer (King and Grace, 2008).

#### **4.5.2 Staff/ Brand Performance**

The next set of questions evaluated staff performance with regard to the brand and included the following:

(Q.8) “Staff performance affected your perception of the brand.”

(Q.9) “Please list three expectations of the service offering you had before the experience.”

(Q.10) “The brand met or exceeded expectations”

(Q.11) “If not, why not?”

In Business A, when asked question eight, one mystery shopper agreed that staff performance affected their perception of the brand, and the other two strongly agreed. The next question was devised to understand what customers had expected of the service and staff based on perceptions about the brand. In Business A one mystery shopper responded to question nine as having the following three expectations prior to using the service,

“For them to be well educated.”

“To come away with knowledge I could use.”

“To have a really good lunch, because of the organic food.”

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Another mystery shopper specified:

“For them to be knowledgeable.”

“Friendly staff.”

“Green atmosphere.”

These are areas which both the management and the staff specified to be important in good service provision for their customers. The next question on the mystery shop scorecard (Question 10) was directly linked with the previous one. It asked customers, “The brand met or exceeded expectations.” To which the two mystery shoppers mentioned above strongly agreed, signifying that both management and staff have a clear understanding of what customers expect from their brand, and are successfully delivering those aspects. The third mystery shopper only listed one prior expectation before consumption of the service which was, “Expected them to be more vigorous in promotion,” but still agreed that the brand met or exceeded expectations.

One mystery shop was conducted for Business B. The respondent agreed with question eight that staff performance affected the brand, and was asked to list three expectations of the service offering they had before the experience (question nine), the responses included,

“Friendly”

“Green (as in environmentally conscious)”

“A peaceful atmosphere.”

The values listed here are similar to the responses given by staff when asked to describe the brand. When asked whether they felt the brand met or exceeded expectations (question ten), the mystery shopper agreed.

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It was unfortunate that the manager of Business C would not allow staff to be included in the study, because when the consumption experience was discussed with the two mystery shoppers both agreed that staff performance affected the brand. Similarly, from the manager’s interview response, it was evident that the management felt staff to be a key determinant in successful service provision. On the mystery shop scorecard, in response to (Q.4), “staff were knowledgeable about the brand” both respondents agreed, and in response to question seven, “Staff played a role in successful service delivery”, one respondent agreed, while the other strongly agreed. When the two mystery shoppers were presented with question nine “list three expectations of the service offering you had before the experience” one mystery shopper replied, “Rustic”, “Bare Boned” and “Natural.”

When this respondent was presented with the next question (Q.10) in which they were asked had “the brand met or exceeded expectations” the respondent strongly disagreed. The follow up question, (Q.11) on the mystery shop scorecard, asked “If not, why not?” to which the respondent replied:

“There was a lack of information about what it was or what it was purporting to be.”

This respondent also agreed to the statement (Q.6) “The actions of the staff were at odds brand offering.” The second mystery shopper, although more positive about the business, also revealed some inconsistencies with what they expected the service to be, and what they actually experienced. When asked to list three expectations they had prior to the experience (Q.9) the second respondent stated

“For it to be different.”

“I expected it to have a spa”

“I expected it to be more like a hotel...not just a room.”

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While this respondent expressed to the researcher that there were aspects of the service provision in Business C which let them down, they still agreed that it met or exceeded expectations (Q.10). This respondent strongly disagreed that the actions of staff were at odds with the brand offering (Q.6) which was contradictory to the response of the other mystery shopper. This could be attributed to many factors such as varying expectations of the brand would be, or which members of staff they interacted with, as the manager earlier stated that not all members of staff are deemed necessary to align to the brand.

It is important to note that customers may have rated the staff and brand experiences poorly because they themselves were unclear as to what the brand actually stood for. Again, the importance of having a strong external brand is evident, and if strong external messages are created first, the same messages can be internalised in the organisation and the risk of conflict between the two may be reduced.

The final two questions on the mystery shop scorecard were with regards to the brands and their ecotourism label.

#### **4.5.3 The Brand in Relation to Eco- Tourism**

Questions twelve and thirteen were created with regard eco-tourism. They were devised to understand the customer’s perceptions of how the brand fitted into the category of eco-tourism, and it was a question which was also posed to owners/managers and staff in the organisations. The second question was formulated as to whether customers felt that the eco-tourism label was the key to the businesses success. The questions asked:

(Q.12) “After experiencing this organisation’s offering, I understand what the term “eco-tourism” entails”

(Q.13) “The eco-tourism brand is central to the success of this organisation”

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When analysing the responses to Q.12 with regard to Business A, two of the respondents agreed with this statement while one respondent strongly agreed. When asked if they felt that organisation was a success due to its eco-tourism brand, one respondent strongly agreed, while the other two strongly disagreed. Both of these respondents explained that due to the beauty of the location, quality of the offering, and friendliness of the staff, they believed that even if it was not an eco-tourism destination it would still excel.

The respondent for Business B felt that after experiencing the offering they strongly disagreed that they understood what the term eco-tourism entailed. The respondent also felt that the eco-tourism brand was crucial for the success of the business.

In Business C there were conflicting answers in between the respondents. One respondent disagreed with question twelve, while the other strongly agreed. Both however felt that the eco-tourism label was crucial to the success of the business.

This suggests that if the service delivery is completed sufficiently to customer expectations, then the fact that a business is eco-centric will not be the only determinant of customer choice. Customers may feel the ecological concern of the organisation to be an added benefit of using a service which they enjoy already. However, in business where such benefits are not visible or unclear, it is evident from the customer responses that the eco-label is a key determinant of the business's success.



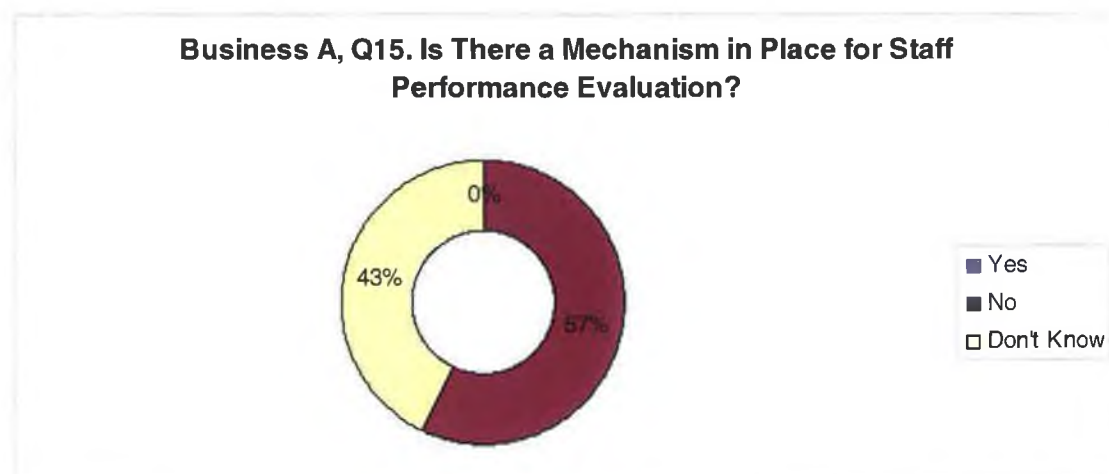
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#### 4.6 Performance Appraisal and Customer Feedback

This section was formulated in line with published research which stresses the need for customer feedback. This is because internal branding is a process which requires continual assessment and adjustment, the business must understand how customers feel at every stage of interaction to develop the brand over time. Businesses A and B revealed that they both had mechanisms in place in which the customer could provide the organisation with feedback about the brand. Both specified that they do not get feedback particularly regarding the brand. Businesses B and C specified that they received feedback via tourism websites, again with none particular to the brand.

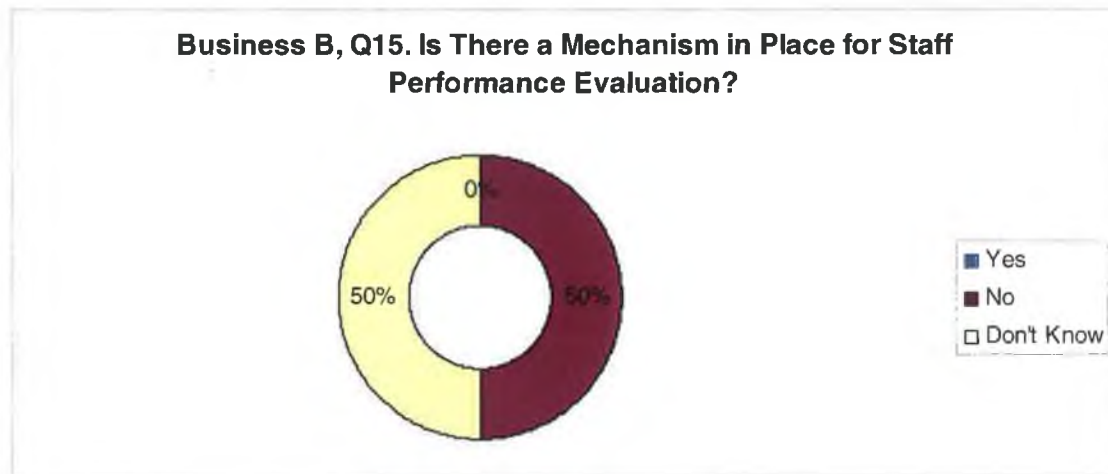
Another central concept to internal branding which was visible in the literature was the need for effective staff performance appraisal. However this was something which was not evident in any of the businesses within the study. When staff were asked in Businesses A and B if there was a mechanism in place, many were not aware if there was or not. This is illustrated in the following two diagrams:

**Graph Sixteen: Performance Evaluation (Business A)**



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**Graph Seventeen: Performance Evaluation (Business B)**



Managers in both businesses specified that there was no instrument in place for measuring staff performance. However, the manager in Business A specified that they are about to introduce a method in the business, but that due to business restructuring, its implementation has been delayed.

Without effective staff performance appraisal, combined with a lack of staff/ brand performance specific customer feedback, businesses may be unclear as to how well their staff are performing with respect to the brand promises. By evaluating staff in conjunction with customer's brand opinions, businesses will be enabling improvement in an array of processes within the organisation as well as service delivery overall.

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#### **4.7 Conclusion**

To solve the research problem, pertinent topics were devised from the research gathered and analysed. Various types of methodology were used to create data from which conclusions were drawn, and a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative data was generated. Critical themes and findings were uncovered from each respondent group.

Staff responses highlighted a lack of formal education and management reinforcement regarding the brand, and at times it appeared there was disparity in what each member thought key brand elements to be. In existing literature, it was discussed how management must lead successful internal branding through education and example, but this was not apparent from the staff responses. Staff in both Businesses A and B did not identify any way in which their personalities matched the brand but, in Business A especially, were able to identify ways in which their personalities positively contributed to the brand. In some instances, staff signified that the brand had not even been discussed in the interview process. Despite the lack of information and education available regarding their brand, the majority of staff still believed their own role in successful delivery of brand promises to be important.

From the management responses it was clear that none of the businesses engaged in external branding to any great extent, despite published literature stressing the importance in internal branding efforts of doing so. However, management could appreciate the benefits of having a well formulated external brand. Managers A and C discussed how they had adapted hiring processes to obtain candidates better suited to the brand, which correlated with what was proposed by theorists. Despite this, and in conjunction with staff responses, all of the managers admitted to not having a programme in place for the continual education and reinforcement of the brand, despite existing literature emphasising a need for such in successful internal branding efforts. A response which was presented from both Managers A and C was that they believed not all staff needed to be educated about the brand, as their role did not require them to communicate brand

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values to customers. This was contradictory to the literature, which suggested that all members within the organisation are vital to the success of the brand, and can be brand advocates even when they are not in the work environment. Management felt staff to be key determinants in the successful delivery of brand promises, despite the lack of brand education provided.

When taking an external perspective of the internal branding efforts of these businesses, customers believed overall, that staff were successfully aligned to the brand. Their perceptions of staff/ brand performance were mainly positive, but conflicting at times, especially in Business C. It was only Business A in which customers believed that the business would still be a success without it's eco-tourism label, mainly due to successful service delivery. It was suggested that in instances where the customer provided negative answers regarding the staff performance in relation to the brand, that such responses may be due to lack of customer understanding as to what the brand would actually deliver before consumption of the service. This again may be attributed to weak external brand messages.

With the analysis and explanation of the primary research complete, it is now possible to propose recommendations and conclude the study which will be dealt with in the next chapter.

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## **Chapter Five- Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The overall aim of this study was to evaluate the role of internal branding within eco-tourism destinations in the North-Western region of Ireland. It was also undertaken to develop an understanding of the impact of internal branding on customer/business relationships in these destinations.

Within in this chapter, the research objectives which were discussed in Chapter One will be evaluated with regard to the completed primary research. Due to the sample size, it is not possible to make conclusions regarding the sector, however clear identifiable trends emerged, and recommendations will be made.

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## **5.2 Objective One: To review existing literature and research about internal branding.**

This objective was achieved by conducting an extensive literature review. Extensive reading was conducted on topics including services marketing, branding, internal marketing, internal branding, and sustainable tourism. An evaluation of existing literature highlighted that there is a gap in the area of internal branding (Thompson et al. 1999; Mahnert and Torres, 2007; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007; Merrilees, 2007). This meant the research was quite topical. This was enhanced by the fact that it was conducted with regard to the eco-tourism sector. This sector within tourism is currently gaining popularity and interest amongst consumers with the rapid depletion of natural resources, and degradation of the environment. Both of the topics, internal branding and eco-tourism, are based around individuals values and beliefs, though there was no research uncovered which made a link between the two.

Whilst branding externally has been around for hundreds of years, internal branding as a concept has only gained attention in the past twenty five years. Theories examined in this research placed great importance in having a top-down approach when implementing internal branding, from the owners and managers throughout every level of the business. All staff members of an organisation were deemed important within the process and cross-functional communications is key. Constant reinforcement by management and education programmes regarding the brand is required for successful implementation of internal branding.

Selection and hiring processes were also dealt with in order to understand the difference ways to hire for personality rather than skills, and the benefits of having a member of staff which cannot not only do the required tasks, but “fit” into the organisation and work harmoniously with co-workers. Several frameworks were suggested for implementation and maintenance of internal branding.

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**5.3 Objective Two: To establish whether managers/ owners make a conscious attempt to hire staff who will compliment the brand offering.**

Findings within this study suggest that the businesses involved engage in some hiring methods with regards to seeking out certain personality traits similar to the brand. In Business A, the manager specified that there were questions regarding commitment to the brand in the interview process, and in Business C the manager expressed that they had a trial period to ensure that the applicant fit in with the organisation, and took existing staff concerns on board. Manager A discussed how the hiring process was changing to include not only job specifications but personality specifications as well. These were practices which were evident in internal branding theory (Thompson et al., 1999; Bowen et al., 1991; King and Grace, 2008).

However, the staff responses indicated that the majority of them did not feel management discussed the brand in the interview process, which would suggest that from a staff perspective, management did not make an attempt to hire those with qualities similar to the brand.

In comparison, when examining the customer responses with regards to staff alignment, the majority of responses were positive, and it would appear that they perceived staff to be aligned to the brand in these businesses. This would suggest that management do make an attempt in some of the businesses to hire staff which are aligned to the brand. It may also be useful to consider whether eco-tourism destinations attract a like minded set of applicants for the job. This is suggested later as an area for further research.

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**5.4 Objective Three: To uncover perceptions of staff in eco-tourism destinations with regards to the role of internal branding in their organisation.**

The perceptions of staff were uncovered with the use of questionnaires and then measured against the responses given by management in interviews. From the staff questionnaires, it was apparent that staff in Business A were much more aware of internal branding practices in their organisation than staff in Business B. In both businesses it was evident that there was no real mechanism in place for the continual education regarding the internal brand. This is at odds with recommendations made in the literature (Mahnert and Torres, 2007). Management realised the role of staff to be crucial in communicating brand values to customers, and yet did not provide any formal education regarding the brand. Staff also perceived their own role in delivering brand promises to be significant.

Because staff in Business A were able to highlight ways in which they felt management engaged in internal branding, despite the manager feeling this to be untrue, suggests that it may be something which can be done, to a certain degree, unconsciously.

This was also made evident by the fact that the majority of staff in the study felt aligned to the brand. When asked to describe themselves and then to describe their brand, none of the staff respondents identified exact matches between the two. Despite this staff were able to explain ways in which their personality complimented the brand which is crucial for internal branding.



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**5.5 Objective Four: To uncover customer’s perceptions on performance of staff in eco-tourism destinations and to determine the effectiveness of the organisation’s internal branding efforts.**

It was evident from the responses given by customers that the majority of staff actions appeared to be aligned to the brand. However, it is important to note that in Business C, the responses were not as positive as in the other two, and at times the customers seemed confused about the brand.

When customer responses were measured against management and staff responses, it was evident that where management and staff engaged in greater levels of internal branding, customer perceptions improved. For example, in Business A, management and staff’s beliefs of what the customer expected from the brand were aligned to what the customer had specified as prior expectations to using the service. Business A had the strongest external brand of the three businesses when evaluating customer responses. This may have attributed to the alignment of the three responses, and led to customers ranking Business A quite high on the mystery shop scorecard.

In contrast, Business C’s manager specified that they did not engage greatly in external or internal branding. When customers expressed their expectations from the business, there seemed to be a gap between what customers expected, and what they received. People tend to expect different things from different service experiences. By implementing a strong external brand the organisation is expressing to customers what they should expect from the business. When external messages are aligned with internal ones, the business has a better chance of successfully delivering upon customers brand expectations.

It was beneficial in this study that the businesses engaged in varying levels of branding, both externally and internally. The vary levels of both highlighted that where there was stronger implementation of these marketing functions, customer perceptions improved.

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**5.6 Objective Five: To suggest recommendations for eco-tourism destinations in the North Western region in Ireland in relation to internal branding.**

In order to achieve this objective, it was necessary for the researcher to analyse all of the data uncovered from primary sources. Recommendations were drawn from where there was visible gaps between the theories which were proven in the literature review, and the information uncovered from the primary sources. From the findings, it emerged that some businesses did not focus a great deal on externally branding their service business, but expressed that they believed a benefit in doing so, such as clearer brand messages being sent to customers. Business in the study expressed that they believed internal branding to be important, as they felt staff to play a vital role in communicating the brand ethos and values. This was reinforced by mystery shops in which customers expressed that they felt staff personality to play a vital role in successful service provision. However, while businesses in the study engaged in some internal branding, there were no set policies and procedures for it. While brand/ business ethos and values were discussed at times in the interview process, it was apparent that none of the businesses in the study regularly reinforced the brand in the minds of staff members.

Existing literature examined in Chapter Three expressed a need for staff performance appraisal for successful internal branding. Despite this, none of the businesses had implemented any such programme (though it is important to note that Business A specified that they had devised a staff performance appraisal programme and had not yet implemented it).

All of the business in the study had mechanisms in which customers could provide feedback, either within the business, or via third party rating websites such as Hostel World and Responsible Travel. The businesses in the study specified that they do not receive any feedback in relation to their brand or staff's role in promoting it. Taking such steps may help to strengthen their brands externally and internally.

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The following are key recommendations for the eco-tourism sector.

### **5.6.1 Recommendation One: Strengthen the External Brand**

Existing literature would suggest that internal branding is a top-down, organisation wide approach. However it was clear in this study that not all of the managers businesses had a clearly defined brand. While staff members and managers could identify values which they believed to be related to the brand, it was apparent that none of the staff members used the same three words to describe the brand in either. The lack of concurrence in the responses suggested that management had not clearly defined the brand to staff.

All of the managers in the study expressed that they believed there was not enough emphasis placed on the external brand within their organisations. Managers were aware there was a need for stronger external brand, and all expressed knowledge of the positive impact of having a strong brand. Only one business believed theirs to be a strong, well-known brand, despite the lack of focus placed on it. The others felt it difficult to project a clear brand message. It is for this reason that the researcher recommends that all eco-tourism destinations in the North- Western region analyse and evaluate their external brands to ensure that they are getting the time and emphasis they require. Having a strong external brand can lead to many benefits within the organisation such as differentiation or facilitating stronger customer bonds (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007; Abimbola and Kocak, 2007). It may be necessary for some businesses re-evaluate their brand, but having clearly defined brand values will make the business more understandable to consumers, and will make branding internally a much easier process (Burmam and Zeplin, 2005).

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### **5.6.2 Recommendation Two: Create Processes for the Continual Promotion and Education of the Brand Internally.**

One of the main findings of King and Grace’s (2008) study was that, the existence of a training programme in businesses regarding the brand ensured improved provision of services. None of the businesses within the study engaged in any brand-specific education upon employment, nor did they continually reinforce brand values. Once strong external brand messages have been created, the researcher suggests that eco-tourism destinations in the North- Western region of Ireland devise agreed procedures and policies for the continued evaluation, education and reinforcement of external brand values internally.

### **5.6.3 Recommendation Three: Implement a Method of Staff Performance Appraisal.**

Staff performance evaluation was another function which was identified as being critical to internal branding efforts (Kotler and Keller, 2006; Keller 2008). Linked with this is having appropriate reward systems in place for staff member who perform satisfactorily or better with regards to the brand (discussed in Bowen et al, 1991; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007); Mahnert and Torres, 2007). All of the managers and staff in the study specified that there was no mechanism in place for staff performance appraisal, though Manager A indicated they would be implementing it in the near future.

It is for this reason that the researcher recommends that eco-tourism destinations operating in the North-Western region of Ireland implement a method of staff performance appraisal. This will help businesses to clearly see which members of staff are working harmoniously with the brand and those which are not. It will highlight areas where the business can make improvements in regards to aligning staff to the brand.

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The researcher also suggests that if processes are implemented, staff be made aware of them. It should be clearly outlined how they will be measured and what is expected of them. Suitable rewards systems should be mutually devised between management and staff so management can develop an understanding of what motivates employees within their organisation. This may improve service provision within the business, resulting in greater satisfaction amongst customers resulting in repeat business.

### 5.7 Future Study

Although in existence for nearly twenty five years, internal branding within published literature has only gained popularity in recent years. Eco-tourism is a trend which is also currently gaining increasing attention and popularity, suggesting that there are many avenues in which further study could be endeavoured with regards to the topic.

- An investigation could be undertaken using more businesses in the region.
- This research topic could be undertaken for the entire island of Ireland.
- A study could be undertaken to prove the most appropriate framework for the implementation and maintenance of internal branding in eco-tourism businesses.
- A study could be undertaken to see if eco-tourism destinations draw a certain type of applicant for the job with certain personality traits, even if they do not advertise for any one type of person.
- An investigation should be made as to what amount of branding eco-tourism businesses engage in. This will highlight whether those which engage more heavily in external branding are more successful in their internal branding efforts, and overall business activities.
- An investigation could be made into the perceived role of managers by staff and customers within internal branding in eco-tourism destinations.

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- An experimental study could be made in which internal branding policies and education programmes are implemented within eco-tourism businesses to see what affect they have on operations and customer satisfaction levels.

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## 5.8 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether managers in eco-tourism destinations in the North Western region of Ireland consciously engaged in internal branding, and what the perceptions of staff, managers and customers were of internal branding in these businesses.

The literature review highlighted the increasing need for eco-tourism options, as one of Ireland’s most attractive aspects to holidaymakers is its clean, “green” environment. Internal branding was a tool which was explained as being useful to create a harmonious work environment and increase customer satisfaction, not only in eco-tourism destinations. However it was suggested that as both internal branding and eco-tourism were both based around strong sets of values and beliefs that a study into the link between the two would be very relevant.

The importance of the role of the manager in internal branding was also addressed. Internal branding is an approach which must be lead from the top down throughout an organisation, and needs constant education, evaluation, and reinforcement. This study illustrated how vital the role of frontline staff is within service industries, as it is often with staff that customers trust their overall satisfaction and happiness with the service. This was apparent both through the analysis of existing literature and the primary data gathered.

Both managers and customers alike expressed that it was important for staff to be aligned to the brand values and ethos. However, all managers in the study expressed that there was no real procedures in place for the education or reinforcement of the brand with staff members. By implementing internal branding policies, businesses are provoking more emotional responses from customers, and encouraging deeper bonds between the brand and customer. Internal branding education will equip front-line staff will the tools they need to foster these relationships.

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In a dynamic and ever-changing business environment, it is vital for eco-tourism organisations to make the move to more structured approaches to guarantee such relationships are continually cultivated, ensuring businesses with thrive into the future.



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## **APPENDICIES**

**Appendix A:** Internal Branding- Staff Questionnaires

**Appendix B:** Interview for Owners/ Managers

**Appendix C:** Internal Branding- Mystery Shop Scorecard

## **APPENDIX A**

## Internal Branding- Staff Questionnaire

I am a post-graduate student in the Institute of Technology Sligo and am currently conducting research into the role of internal branding within eco-tourism destinations in the North-West Region of Ireland. I would be most grateful if you would complete the following questionnaire. Please be assured that individual responses are confidential.

**1. How long have you been employed here and what is your role?**

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**2. Please use three words to describe your organisations brand.**

- ---
- ---
- ---

**3. Was the organisations brand discussed in the interview process?(Please Tick)**

- Yes  
 No

**If you answered yes, can you please explain how?**

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**4. Did you receive any formal training about the brand when you commenced employment?**

- Yes  
 No

**If you answered yes, can you please explain how?**

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**5. Please describe how you communicate the brand values to the customer.**

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**6. Do you feel the description “Eco-Tourism” is successfully represented by your brand?**

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

**Can you please explain your answer?**

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**7. How relevant do you feel branding is in regards to eco-tourism destinations?**

**(Please Tick)**

- Very Relevant
- Relevant
- Don't Know
- Not Relevant
- Very Irrelevant



**8. Please describe, if any, the benefits of being an “eco-tourism” brand brings to your organisation.**

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**9. Do you feel management makes a continual effort to educate and reinforce the staff about the brand? (Please Tick)**

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

**If you answered yes, how do they do so?**

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**10. Please describe your personality with just three words:**

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- ---
- ---

**11. Can you identify any way in which your personality compliments the organisation's brand?**

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**12. Are you aware of any attempts by your organisation to engage in internal branding, e.g. seeking staff with similar values to those of the organisation's brand? (Please Tick)**

Yes

No

**If you answered yes, can you please explain?**

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**13. What do you feel your customers value most in good service provision?**

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**14. How do you deliver the features which you have specified as most important?**

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**15. Is there a mechanism in place for staff performance evaluation? (Please Tick)**

Yes

No

Don't know

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire!**

## **APPENDIX B**

## Interview for Owners/Managers

1. Can you specify your role within the organisation and how long you've worked here?
2. Can you please describe the brand of your organisation?
3. Who is responsible for branding the organisation? Do you have a role in this process?
4. What role, if any, does staff play in the branding of the organisation?
5. What is your understanding of the role of branding?
6. What benefit, if any, does branding bring to your organisation?
7. How does your brand fit into the category of "eco-tourism"?
8. How do you communicate this to customers?
9. Do you communicate the brand values to staff? How? How frequently?
10. What is your opinion on the staff's role in communicating the brand to customers?
11. Do you engage in any training specific to your brand when hiring new members of staff?
12. Do you look for specific traits and values when considering a new candidate for employment?
13. Do you feel it is important to align staff traits and values with that of the brand? Why do you feel this way?
14. Do you align staff with the brand in this organisation? How?
15. Do you measure staff performance? How?
16. Do you have a mechanism in place where customers can provide you with feedback? What kind of feedback do you receive about your brand if any?
17. What portion of your business do you feel comes from repeat business?
18. In regards to service delivery, what do you feel customers value most from staff performance?

## APPENDIX C

## Internal Branding- Mystery Shop Score Card

Please tick how you rate each aspect of service provision.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
1. The organisation is strongly branded.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. The staff live the brand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Staff personality suited the brand of the organisation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Staff were knowledgeable about the brand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Staff made a positive contribution to the brand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. The actions of the staff were at odds with the brand offering.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Staff played a role in successful service delivery.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Staff performance affected your perception of the brand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Please list 3 expectations of the service offering you had before the experience:	<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;">1</div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;">2</div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black;">3</div>					
10. The brand met or exceeded expectations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

11. If not, why not?

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<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>
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12. After experiencing this organisation's offering, I understand what the term "eco-tourism" entails.

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13. The eco-tourism brand is central to the success of this organisation.

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